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B.V. LARSON**



GALACTIC LIBERATION BOOK 5

**STRAKER'S
BREAKERS**

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STRAKER'S BREAKERS

(Galactic Liberation Series #5)

by

David VanDyke

and

B. V. Larson

Galactic Liberation Series:

Starship Liberator

Battleship Indomitable

Flagship Victory

Hive War

Straker's Breakers

OceanofPDF.com

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Part 1: Expatriate

I, Derek Straker, united the majority of humankind into the Earthan Republic and defeated the Opter-Crystal invasion. We drove the Opters back and forced their Sarmok faction to quit, leaving the moderate Miskor in charge. After we won the so-called Hive War, we wanted to see humanity free, at peace, and prosperous for the first time in centuries.

Unfortunately, this didn't happen.

Also unfortunately, it took me a while to realize it.

As your Liberator, I'd hoped things would improve dramatically. Usually it takes a generation or two before the brutality and sacrifice of war is forgotten and the natural prosperity that springs up from a new peace is threatened by the greedy, the corrupt, the tyrannical. With strong, just, and wise rulers, those forces can be kept at bay. A golden age like this can be extended for decades, perhaps centuries.

Historically speaking, that is.

This time, unfortunately, the enemies of freedom and justice within the Republic—represented by the Victory Party—immediately began to undermine humanity's best interests.

I now clearly see my mistake. It was a simple lack of ruthlessness. I didn't go as far as my opponent. Vic, the rogue AI who'd founded the Victory Party, was clever. He created a political movement that didn't need him to function, infusing it with every sly dirty trick and shrewd political tactic culled from history. He essentially ran a deep-search on past civilizations to gather the most effective methods of political trickery. No despotic or fanatical faction was overlooked. The Caesars and the mobs of Rome. Machiavelli and the Papal States. Robespierre and Napoleon. Bolsheviks, Nazis, and Maoists. The Ayatollahs, the Bishops, and the Cabal. The Mafia, the Bratva, and the Tongs. The Sociomorphists, the Unionists, and the Mutualists.

Born from this muck-racking of concepts, we have the Victory Party today. The available historical examples provided them with a reference book for terror and tyranny.

So, even without their AI mastermind, the Victory Party managed to take control of the politics of the former Hundred Worlds first, and then spread to the old Mutuality.

I'd purged the Mutuality of its collectivists and its secret police torturers, but I'd failed to purge Atlantis, the capital system of the Hundred Worlds. There, the worst of scum-sucking oligarchs and their paid-for politicians still lurked. Their money didn't come from real businesses or investments, but from bribery and favors to acquire lucrative government contracts funded by ever-higher taxes—taxes they themselves evaded with cronyism and bribes.

They were leeches and parasites, and they opened the door for the thugs and fascists.

The Victory Party Blueshirts muscled in and took over this system with ruthless efficiency. Party-controlled government exploited the middle and lower classes instead of protecting them, becoming nothing but a conduit for the transfer of wealth to the Party elite and their buddies, while the Blueshirts intimidated anyone who didn't comply.

I didn't know it at the time, but John Karst, who'd betrayed me so long ago, was a rogue humanopt, one of the many Sarmok Opter agents seeded throughout human space. He'd tried to derail my liberation once before by kidnapping Carla, then he'd escaped to my enemies in the Hundred Worlds and risen rapidly in the ranks of political fixers.

With the reunification of humanity, John Karst adopted a new identity as John Steel, a demagogue and rabble-rouser. He joined the Victory Party early and eventually came to control it with a combination of personality and biochemical influence tricks, calling himself "The Prefect." Once the Victory Party dominated the Republic and crushed the other parties, the old title of Prime Minister became only a footnote.

As time went on, more and more power gathered to the hands of one man: John Steel.

My first inkling of impending doom came when, despite the apparent strength of the economy, the military budget was cut to the bone. Some downsizing was expected, but during the five years since the end of the Hive War, over eighty percent of our fleet was scrapped, mothballed, or decommissioned and sold for cents on the credit. Ground forces were disarmed and dispersed into local populations. Eventually, veterans were forced to take the Party brainlinks if they wanted their pensions and benefits. Many were warehoused in grim apartment blocks like VR-zombies to make sure they didn't cause trouble.

Steel also secretly revived the Human Organic Command program, encouraging the use of the Hok parasite. Those who protested too strenuously against the Party, anyone deemed troublemakers, were turned into soldier-slaves and used as the perfect enforcers.

This fate worse than death terrified many into compliance. To others it was the perfect revenge weapon, or a way of removing an enemy. Denounce your neighbor as a traitor to the Party and they might be turned into a Hok.

I discovered most of this later, but I'd had clues. Unfortunately, I'd been naïve, thinking that a representative government—a republic, as I'd decreed—would be self-balancing, without need of extralegal intervention from people like me.

It turned out I was wrong.

Fortunately, during this time I'd rebuilt the Breakers into a small but formidable regular formation. With the help of our own AI, Indy, we hacked the military supply corps. I used my waning pull to get all remaining mechsuits and pilots transferred to me, along with their support forces, instead of being disbanded. By these same methods I got a lot of surplus high-end conventional gear shipped directly to the Breakers, along with a steady flow of the best recruits, noncoms and officers from the disbanded formations.

In fact, we'd ended up with a flood of veterans and their families moving to Culloden, the planet where we'd settled, more people than we could incorporate into the Breakers' organizational structure. I formed two extra Breaker brigades, Second and Third, designating them as reserves for the active First Brigade.

I collected some Hok, too. Better with us as clean, honorable warriors than as slave-thugs elsewhere.

My sister Mara joined us on Culloden and worked tirelessly on a cure for the Hok parasite, but the Opters who'd created it and given it to the Mutuality so long ago had designed it to be irreversible. Mara was sure she'd eventually crack the problem, but progress was slow.

Why didn't anyone in power, particularly the growing Party, stop me from gathering what I could? I suppose those in control thought ground forces were obsolete, useless when parked on a planet like Culloden, without conventional warships for support. Let Straker have his toys and live out his life in peace, far away from the centers of power. That was

probably their initial idea. Later, when Karst took over as Steel, I'd already finished building my army.

They began to worry about me at that point. After all, mechsuirer had led the Liberation and overthrown two governments. Once the Party had accomplished its initial aims and took control of the major systems, Steel and the Victory Party realized they couldn't risk another rebellion.

After they'd consolidated his power, they came for me and mine.

Derek Barnes Straker, *A History of Galactic Liberation*

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Chapter 1

Breakers Headquarters. Culloden star system, 2825 A.D., five years after the Hive War.

Derek Straker paused at the edge of the rocky cliff that bounded his personal holding and gazed westward over the whitecapped ocean. The stiff onshore breeze felt clean on his face after its travel across the vast open sea. A sailboat skittered over the waves six kilometers out while seabirds, nearer, screeched and dove into the water after fish.

"I never get tired of the cliffs," Carla Engels said as she took his arm and rested her head on his shoulder. Her straight black hair, grown long now, flew up to tickle his nose and get in his eyes. "We should build something up here—a bungalow, a cabin. With a deck, where we can sit and eat breakfast and watch the wildlife."

"Something away from the kids, you mean?"

Carla laughed. "I love them, but they're a handful. Sometimes Johnny's even more hardheaded than Katie."

"You're surprised?"

She laughed again. "Not considering their parents, no. Anyway, you and I don't have enough time alone together, and we can certainly afford to build it."

Straker's comlink in his pocket beeped. "So much for time alone together." He stuck it in his ear and turned on the external speaker so Carla could hear too. "I thought I said no calls today."

The voice that spoke belonged to Indy, resident AI of the *Independence*, the Breakers' flagship, in high orbit above. "My apologies, General Straker,"—as a purely ground-force commander, he'd given up the title of Admiral—"but this is urgent. I have twelve military-grade capital drives on my scopes, inbound for this location."

"ETA?" Straker asked, his tone becoming deadly serious.

"Eight hours nominal for one pass. Twenty-six if they intend to decelerate and take up orbit around Culloden."

"Comms?"

"None so far, sir," Indy said.

"Ominous..."

"I thought so, too."

“Any IDs yet?”

“I’ve tentatively identified them based on their emissions signatures—all Republic warships. Three dreadnoughts, three heavy cruisers, six destroyers.”

“Pretty good guessing,” Straker said.

“They’re not EMCON. They’re simply not talking yet. I’ve hailed them on FTL comlink. No answer.”

“They should have at least one ship with an FTL comlink.”

“All the more reason to wonder why they haven’t contacted us. They could have begun transmitting as soon as they transited.”

“I agree. Combat assessment?”

Indy paused, no doubt for rhetorical effect rather than to ponder, as the AI could think thousands of times faster than a human. “In space? I’d give them a fight, but I can’t win against these odds. Independence has no spinal weaponry. Eventually I’d have to run or die.”

Straker did pause to think, wishing uselessly that Indy’s consciousness still occupied the old, gutted battleship *Indomitable*.

Carla looked up into Straker’s face. “You think it’s our worst-case scenario?” she asked.

Straker pressed his lips together. “I think we have to assume so. They’re not talking—that’s a bad sign.”

“Then we have to implement the noncombatant evacuation order. Get the civilians out.”

“Agreed. Indy, implement the NEO and the combat-ready plan.”

“All annexes?” Indy asked.

Straker had no choice but to activate all the annexes—the sub-plans to the standard combat operations order. Worst case meant worst case. He could always cancel if he was wrong. “All annexes. We’ll be back to base in half an hour. Straker out.”

The aircar trip took only twenty-three minutes as Carla overrode the safeties and sent the vehicle screaming at near-Mach over the landscape. She brought it in hot onto the Breakers’ central aerospace pad and dropped Straker off.

“I’ll see to the kids and start cracking the whip on the civilians,” she yelled before roaring away.

Breakers and their ground vehicles scurried in all directions, exuding a sense of purposeful chaos. Pilots prepped rows of lifters and Marksman

dropships, while in the distance dust showed where armored vehicles were forming into lines, heading for their loading points.

General Johnny “Loco” Paloco was there to meet him. “The shit is hitting the fan,” he said with a smile.

Straker began walking toward the headquarters building. “Then why do you look happy?”

“Relieved, more like it. I knew this long break we’ve been on couldn’t last. Nothing does.”

“You’re the most optimistic pessimist I know, Loco.”

“I think that title goes to Gurung, actually.”

“No argument there.” Straker had never seen the Gurkha without a broad smile, which became bigger the hotter things got. “But my point stands.”

Loco shrugged. “I am what I am. Sucks for the civilians, but you and me weren’t made to sit in garrison and do nothing but train.”

Straker turned to look Loco in the face. “You realize we have to either fight our own people or run, right?”

“Are they our people?”

“Humans, anyway.”

“I don’t care who I fight, Derek. Figuring that stuff out is your job. As long as my kid is safe, me and my suit are at your service.”

“Mine? Not the Republic’s?”

Loco snorted. “The Breakers are loyal to you, Derek. To the Liberator, not to some government a hundred light-years away. Besides, the Victory Party doesn’t represent us.”

Straker sighed. “We’re devolving into feudalism and tribalism. Loyalty to a lord, or a party, not to a constitution or nation. I’d hoped to move beyond that.”

“You know, for a guy who reads history you sure do ignore its lessons.”

Straker bristled. “What do you mean?”

“People don’t fight for their governments. They fight for their buddies, for their families, maybe for the leaders they know personally.”

“Sometimes they fight for their ideals, or a cause. For the people, or the common good. To destroy evil.”

Loco held his hands out, palms down, one high, one low. He wiggled the bottom hand. “That stuff’s down here.” He waggled the top hand. “My stuff’s up here. Mine always beats yours.”

“That’s...pathetic.”

“That’s reality,” Loco replied. “You always wanted to serve something greater, something big, huge, Derek—the Hundred Worlds, the Republic, the people, the Constitution—the fucking galaxy, for Cosmos’ sake. But these guys—your guys—” he gestured around them, “—they look to you to figure that stuff out for them. Their ‘something greater’ is the Breakers. The Breakers are their family, and the Breakers are Straker’s Breakers. You’re the commander. They trust you. They trust me. They trust each other. They don’t trust them.” Loco stabbed his index finger up at the sky. “Do you?”

“No. I don’t.” Straker’s heart was bleak as he surveyed the men and women rushing to do his will. “And yeah. I know all that, deep down. I just hoped we could’ve avoided this, could’ve been more.”

“We are what we are, Derek. You’re the Liberator, but we’re the Breakers. Now you gotta decide what the Breakers are gonna do.”

“Fight or run.”

“Yeah.”

“What do you think?”

Loco chewed a lip. “I say fight. And you?”

Straker sighed. “I’m not the reckless young man I used to be. Five years and two children...they’ve changed me. For the better, I hope. I like to think I’m wiser now.”

“Which means...”

“I’m tending toward running—still with Annex Zulu options, of course. Leaving the Republic entirely.”

Loco shrugged. “It’s not my decision, though. Not really yours, either. It’s theirs.”

Straker’s eyebrows rose. “You just got done saying how they’re all so loyal to me, and I’m the commander, but suddenly they decide on their own? Which is it?”

Loco grabbed Straker’s lapel in his fist and shook it, stopping him in his tracks. “If we were fighting anyone but our own government, I’d say it’s your decision. But, if you do anything except comply with the civilian government, no matter how corrupt they’ve gotten, you’ve mutinied. Everyone has the right to decide that for themselves, whether to follow you into mutiny or not. You can make a lot of decisions for them, but not that one. You have to give them that choice for their own.” Loco released Straker’s tunic and patted it flat. “Just this once.”

“Yeah. You’re right.” Straker sighed, and then stuck in his comlink.
“Indy, you still listening?”

“Of course, General.” Naturally, the AI could easily pay attention to many things at once. She probably had a permanent subroutine keeping tabs on Straker. A little creepy, but in this case, it made Indy the perfect aide-de-camp and divisional chief of staff.

Straker eyed the big chrono on the wall critically. Twenty-six hours, best case. That wasn’t much time to prepare.

“It’s 1120 hours now,” he said. “Pass the word for the key personnel to assemble in the Big Room at 1200.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

“Straker out.” He slapped Loco’s shoulder. “Let’s go get a hot meal. They’ll be shutting down the mess hall after lunch, and I get a feeling it’ll be a long day.”

* * *

At noon, Straker reached the door of the Big Room—the Breakers’ gymnasium-sized ops-intel fusion center. Peering inside, he saw a busy crowd. Techs and watchstanders vied for space with commanders and a host of staff officers and senior noncoms, waiting with controlled tension. No matter how hard Straker tried to keep the Breakers lean, during peacetime there was always headquarters creep.

That would change now. Clerks would become gunners, drivers and loaders. Aides and execs would put on battlesuits and mechsuits. Mess sergeants and medics would become quartermasters and rear guards until supplies were needed or casualties flowed into the medical modules. The reservists of Second and Third Brigades would be closing up their shops and factories, donning their uniforms and strapping on their personal weapons and gear.

Straker wondered how many Breakers he’d have left after his announcement. If he got lucky, he’d only lose some of the combat service personnel, maybe some support, and no front-line troops.

Heiser, the division sergeant major, cleared his throat from behind Straker. That prompt was enough to jolt Straker out of his reverie. He squared his shoulders and stepped into the room.

“Tench-hun!” Heiser roared, and the Big Room quieted and stilled. Watchstanders continued their duties, monitoring and murmuring into their comlinks, but the rest snapped to attention.

“At ease,” Straker called as he marched to the podium at one end. He already had his comlink patched into the PA and the division’s all-hands channel, so everyone in the room or on a comlink could hear. “Ladies and gentlemen, I’m sure you know the basic situation, but I’ll review it for you. A Republic military task force is on its way here. They haven’t communicated, which they easily could’ve done on a secure channel. General Paloco, Admiral Engels, Captain Indy and I all agree: we have to assume the worst.”

“What is the worst, Liberator?” Heiser asked over his own comlink, following the script they’d hurriedly prepared. The senior noncom had to speak for the troops, looking out for their welfare, so he must appear to be asking the hard questions of the commander. Better a prepared question from a loyal man than an unexpected one asked by someone else in sudden anger and fear.

“The worst is that the government is coming to arrest us. To break us up, intern us maybe.”

A stir of muttering swept the room.

“At ease!” Heiser bellowed. “Quiet!” Then he continued the script. “Are you sure that’s the worst that could happen?”

Straker made a show of thinking this over. “I suppose it could be worse than that. You all know the rumors—more than rumors, since I’ve heard from some of our remaining friends in the Fleet—that the Parliamentary Intelligence Agency is making Hok again, using prisoners... under Victory Party direction.”

“Well, what’s wrong with that?” Loco chimed in on cue. “Might as well put the criminals to use!”

Straker held up a hand. “I might agree with you, as an alternative to capital punishment. But what about petty crime? Kids get busted for shoplifting. You want them turned into Hok? What about citizens who demonstrate against corruption and get arrested? What about those who oppose Steel and his ambition? You think he’ll show mercy? Or will he turn them into Hok?”

Growls and angry mutterings rippled through the room.

Straker waited until they quieted to continue. “If Steel makes Hok out of anyone who causes him trouble, you think he won’t arrest us and inject us with the parasite? You know what the tame newsnets have been saying lately—how we Breakers are a danger to the peace and prosperity of the Republic, when we’ve never done anything out of line.”

This time he let the murmuring swell into loud conversations. Men and women gestured broadly at each other as their voices rose, and two young sergeants scuffled until a trio of senior noncoms broke it up.

At what he judged was the right moment, Straker spoke again. “That’s the worst-case scenario, ladies and gentlemen. They might declare us all criminals and turn us into Hok. On the other hand, this might simply be some comms-out priority mission. This task force might be escorting us on some operation against a new, unknown threat.”

“But sir!” Colonel Winter, the commander of the Breakers’ elite First Battalion mechsuiters, asked the first unscripted question. “If that were true, they’d have at least given us an encrypted alert order. Complete silence is concerning, to say the least. There’s no reason for it.”

Bless you for adding that in, Straker thought. “Good point, Martin. If everything’s on the level, they’d send flash traffic—even if nothing but ‘stand by for further orders.’ But we have to go with the worst case, and the worst case is,” he paused for effect, “they’ll hold our families hostage, disband us, and make as many of us they like into Hok. Or, they might even decide to bombard us from orbit. Kill us all. If so, we’ll have to run. Or fight.”

“General,” Commander Sinden, the brigade intelligence officer, said with a raised hand, “what if none of that’s true? What if it’s legitimate? Perhaps some aliens have broken all our encryption, and the task force is afraid of being overheard? What if they have widespread comms malfunction? Viruses in their computer systems? What if their SAIs became sentient and mutinied? We simply don’t know. We need more data.”

The murmuring rose again, until Straker held up a calming hand. “Thank you, Commander, for doing your duty and providing an alternate view. If any of that turns out to be true, then we’ll have a good laugh about all the work we did for nothing. But if the worst comes, we need to be prepared. And for that, we need to be united.”

There were shouts then from the crowd. “We are united!” and “Tell us what to do, sir!” These flew thick and fast, until Straker again spoke.

“If the worst comes, what we’re doing will look like mutiny. Now, for me, I don’t call it mutiny to refuse unlawful orders, orders that will destroy my family—and you, Breakers, are my family. This isn’t a democracy, but this particular decision is one we all have to make for ourselves. So right now, this one time, I’m asking you to choose: If you want to submit to the governments’ orders, whatever they may be, proceed to the infirmary compound with your families. By doing so, you’ll show the Republic task force you’re out of the Breakers, and are complying with whatever orders they give you.”

“And for those who don’t?” Colonel Winter asked.

“All the noncombatants will evac as per the NEO. Then, I’ll have to decide whether the Breakers evac with them, or fight.”

Now came the real test. He’d given them the hard choice of leaving the Breakers or participating in a rebellion.

Giving them a choice of any kind was dangerous for a commander, of course. They might feel emboldened to try to seize the next decision from him, such as the decision of whether to fight or run.

On one hand, it would be popular to ask them for their opinion—at least his commanders, his staff, and his senior noncoms—whether to fight or run.

On the other hand, to do so would set a precedent he couldn’t afford. Pretty soon, they’d be thinking every decision was up for debate—and leadership by committee was the ultimate oxymoron. Unless he wanted the let the Breakers become merely a civilian organization which happened to possess heavy weapons, he had to remain their commander, in fact as well as in name.

No, it was best to give them the hardest choice up front. Then, everything else got easier.

“Everyone who wants to leave the Breakers and comply, notify your supervisors and go now. Everyone who’s staying must let those who’d decide to leave alone. Don’t hinder them or harass them. Respect their decision and get on with your work. For all the Breakers remaining, I’ll have new orders for you by 1300 hours. Carry on.”

Straker left the Big Room with their eyes burning the back of his neck.

Chapter 2

Straker on Culloden

“You’re planning to fight, right, boss?” Loco asked Straker as they walked out of the Big Room toward their offices.

“Are you really asking, or trying to influence me?”

“Who me, influence you?” Loco lifted his hands. “Cosmos forbid! I’m only your best friend and second-in-command.”

“Carla might challenge you for those titles.”

“Now you’re just arguing to argue.”

“So what if I am?”

“You always get bitchy when you’re trying to figure something out.”

Straker sighed. “I guess so. I’m working through my decision.” As he turned into his outer office, his personal staff greeted him with nods and waves. They’d long ago been told to forgo ceremony and do their work during his comings and goings. Heiser followed the two men into Straker’s office and closed the door behind them.

Straker settled into his desk chair. “Sit down, gents. Get yourself something. Scotch for me.”

Heiser moved to pour.

“Me too, Top,” Loco said, throwing himself onto the sofa and lacing his hands behind his head. “Make mine a double. I’m gonna need it.”

Heiser was just distributing the drinks when Engels slipped into the room. Heiser handed her Loco’s glass and poured Loco another.

She lifted it, catching Straker’s eye, and then slugged it back like a trooper. “The kids are taken care of. You’re planning to fight, right, Derek?” Only she said the latter in a completely different tone from Loco’s—a disapproving one.

“Loco wants to stay. You want to run?”

“I don’t see what staying gets us, other than a bunch of dead families.”

“Families... That’s what our troops are now.”

“Most of them.”

Straker sipped, put his glass down and rubbed his hands together. “Running is the safe bet. We preserve the Breakers, but we remove ourselves from the Republic. If these ships are on the level after all, we’ll have bugged out without permission, but that can be smoothed over.”

“So you think that’s the right option?”

“Not sure yet. I’m thinking out loud.”

“We can keep inquiring from aboard the *Independence*.” Engels said.

“Be truthful. Tell them what it looks like to us, tell them they need to talk, whatever the risks. Which are minimal, if they really are being straight with us. They could use the FTL comlink, or a tightbeam laser. Or even send over a shuttle to hand-deliver a SITREP and our orders. If they won’t do that, well... we disappear into sidespace. Run for the Starfish Nebula, or the frontier planets. We can ask one of the independent worlds for asylum—or settle on an empty one we find.”

Straker stood to pace slowly around his large wooden desk, head down. “That all makes sense if I believed Steel would simply let us go. But Benota’s been replaced as Minister of War, and Director DeChang knows which way the wind is blowing. He joined the Party, and he won’t stick his neck out for us. Any other friends we had are being sidelined. Look at Zholin. He tried to be a good soldier and they cashiered him on some bullshit pretext. Then he disappeared.”

“Really?” Engels displayed shock. “I hadn’t heard that.”

“Our Ruxin pipeline says he was sent to a PAI prison. I think they’ve made a Hok out of him. Anyone want to bet against me?”

“Fuck me,” Heiser exclaimed. “Sorry, ma’am.”

“Fuck me is right,” Engels echoed with a grimace. “Bad enough losing friends in combat, but to have your mind taken...”

“That’s why we have to stay and fight,” Straker said.

“I understand your feelings, Derek,” Engels said. “But what does staying get us except casualties? Even if we fight, winning will be difficult. Steel and these Victory Party people, they’re vicious. They won’t forget. They’ll hunt us down in revenge.”

“We can’t even depend on them letting us run without a fight,” Straker replied. “They’ll hunt us down anyway.”

“How do you know that?”

“Follow my logic, and tell me I’m wrong.”

“I’m listening.”

Straker continued to pace. “They’ve gutted the Fleet, fearing internal opposition more than alien threats. Granted, they kept the best ships and retired old ones, but they used the reorganization to get rid of the best, most independent fighting commanders, the ones who might have opposed any

power grab. They put their political cronies in charge of as many ships as they could, and every commander has a Party ‘Loyalty Officer’ at their elbow to keep an eye on them. Do you think there are any good people left on those ships?”

The other three in the room shook their heads slowly.

“To me, it looks like they’re making a move to get rid of the Breakers. If not, we can always stand down. If so, the fleet commanders we’ll be dealing with will be their hardcore Party loyalists—officers and crews that will follow any order, even if it means murdering us. But they don’t have endless supplies of such hardcore people and ships. If we deal them a sharp defeat right here, right now, we could reverse the situation, head for Atlantis, and depose Steel.”

Engels threw up her hands. “You want to stage another coup five years after the last one? You’re not a dictator, Derek, and you’re not the government’s policeman.”

“No, I’m the Liberator. The new constitution was supposed to establish that position—an official elected position, after I stepped down—that would safeguard the Republic, preserve the separation of powers, and make sure things didn’t go off the rails. But they took that position out of the constitution, and they seem to be ignoring the parts of the Statement of Rights they don’t like. For example, making more Hok is banned, but they’re doing it. A one-party system is also prohibited—but the Victory party is stealing elections and assassinating opposing candidates. Now they’ve got the majority in Parliament, they’re systematically eliminating all other parties. What am I supposed to do?”

“I’ll tell you what you’re not supposed to do, Derek Barnes Straker,” Engels said, placing her hands on her hips. “You’re not supposed to keep risking everyone’s life to save a system that doesn’t want to be saved. Every damned day you talk to me about history. Well, the only way humanity’s going to learn from history is to go through the ugly parts. They have to work it out for themselves, not have the white knight Sir Derek Straker constantly playing hero!”

“Hey, we like playing hero,” Loco said.

“Shut up!” Straker and Engels said simultaneously, while Heiser tried to make himself small in a corner armchair.

Loco threw up his hands. “Sor-ry! Just trying to lighten the mood. But hey, um, Derek?”

“What?”

“Let’s say we clean these guys’ clocks. I have no idea how, since they outgun Indy by ten to one, and if we stay here on the planet we’ve trapped ourselves, but hey, just for the sake of argument, let’s say we do it. We magically manage to capture all those ships and head for Atlantis. Even with thirteen ships we won’t get past the orbital fortresses, and even if we do, there’s no guarantee the Breakers can overthrow the government. But even if we can, do you think the Victory Party will just give up? Or will they write Atlantis off and organize the other thousand systems against us?”

Straker smashed his fist into his palm with an audible crack. “We have to try!”

“No, we don’t,” Engels said. “We’re not responsible for all of humanity. *You’re* not. But we are responsible for the Breakers—twenty thousand troops and about the same number of family members.”

Straker saw Loco agreed with her, and he figured Heiser did too, though he was keeping quiet.

“Now look, boss,” Loco said, “I don’t want these bastards to say they ran us off without a fight, but we’re gonna pay a hard price if we stay. It would be double-stupid to go trying to liberate the whole Republic one more time. Last time, the planets were like dominoes ready to fall. Not anymore. You gotta give up on being the Galactic Liberator all the time. Maybe just stick to keeping us Breakers liberated?”

Straker took a deep breath, and then another. The wild dream that had sprung full-blown into his head dispersed like a puff of smoke in a high wind. As much as he hated to admit it, they were right. He couldn’t gamble the lives of all his troops—the breadwinners of the dependent families even now being evacuated—on such a long shot.

“Okay... Okay, I started to let my imagination run away with me,” Straker said. “But like you said, Loco, I can’t stand to run away without bloodying their noses. Just like with the Opters and the Crystals, we have to pound them hard, make them not want to mess with us again.”

“Didn’t work with the aliens, though, did it?” Engels said. “They just came after us harder. The best thing we can do is pull chocks and vanish. Lull them into a false sense of security, and in five or ten years, after we’ve built up forces, we can come back and kick their legs out from under them.”

“No,” Straker said. “We can’t just cut and run. That would be cowardly and shirking our responsibility as Republic citizens. Steel is on top, but he’s

still shaky. He hasn't really consolidated power. Better to expose his weakness right now, while the opposition parties still have some strength. A brutal, embarrassing military defeat might do that."

"But how?" Engels said. "I can't see how we can possibly win."

Straker made a face. Carla wouldn't like this next part. "There's... well... an *extra*, secret annex to the combat operations plan. Annex Zulu."

Engels put down her glass and stepped in front of Straker as he paced. "A secret annex? To the plan? That I don't know about?"

"Yeah."

Engels's face reddened ominously. "What the hell is this Annex Zulu?"

"It's my code name for how to deal with the worst, worst-case scenario. It takes advantage of some elements almost nobody knows about."

Engels voice rose toward a shriek. "Almost nobody? Including me?"

Loco spoke up, obviously trying to head off an explosion. "Zulu, huh? Didn't that work out crappy for the British?"

"Not Zulu like the tribal people," Straker said. "Zulu like the letter Z, the end of the phonetic alphabet. Alpha, Bravo, Charlie... Zulu. Annex Zulu."

Engels spoke angrily, unmollified. "So... you cut me out of the loop again."

"Hey," Loco said, "I don't know what it is either."

Heiser shrugged. "Me neither."

Engels glared hard at Straker. "Who does know?"

A voice from the room intercom spoke up. "I'm so glad you asked."

Engels gaped at the comlink speaker as if it had grown eight arms. "Zaxby?"

Chapter 3

Straker on Culloden

“I have returned,” Zaxby said over Straker’s office comlink speaker. “And just in time, too, it seems. You squabbling humans need my clarity and expertise.”

Straker, Engels, Heiser and Loco all began to speak at once.

Loco yelled the loudest. “I thought you were having a great old time as the Grand Poobah of Ruxin and consort of Premier Vuxana. How the hell did you just happen to show up now?”

“It wasn’t happenstance, General Paloco. The Ruxin intelligence services are the finest in the universe, and with my own superior brainpower I divined the situation. It seemed clear that the Breakers would consider implementing Annex Zaxby, so—”

“Wait a minute. Annex Zaxby?” Engels’ brows furrowed at Straker. “There’s another annex I don’t know about?”

“No, no, same annex,” Straker explained. “He wanted to call it Zaxby, but I thought that’d be too obvious, so we called it Annex Zulu.”

“But now that it’s implemented, we can call it by its rightful name,” Zaxby said. “Annex Zaxby.”

“So what exactly is Annex Zulu-Zaxby?” Loco asked. “Other than having a Breakers’ reunion party, which I’m all for, mind you, as long as there’s free beer.”

“It’s the way to win the losing scenario.” Straker said, relieved that Zaxby had shown up so far ahead of schedule. Much depended on the oddball octopoid, and Straker hated depending on others. Like Loco—and Carla, and all of his best officers—Zaxby was a pain in the ass, but he’d come to realize, of all Zaxby’s faults, unreliability wasn’t one of them.

Like me, Straker thought. Maybe being a pain in the ass is a prerequisite for being a good combat commander. Annoying in peacetime, superb in war. The more time I spend in this business, the more I realize who my real friends are. Not the ones who simply follow orders, but those willing to ignore them when needed.

When he was done outlining Annex Zulu, Straker checked his chrono. “Coming up on 1300. That’s the summary. Everyone on board, now that you know we have a fighting chance?”

The two men nodded.

Engels reluctantly followed suit. "I'm just concerned about the noncombatants...and as long as Zaxby can do what he claims—"

"Have I ever lied to you, Carla Engels?" Zaxby's voice asked.

"You are prone to exaggeration, Zaxby."

"I protest in the most strenuous terms! I have never once exaggerated anything. At all. Ever. Not once."

"I rest my case."

"Well. Time for me to leave in a huff."

"You're not even here," Loco said. "You're on comlink."

"And grateful for it, considering the amount of cologne you drown yourself in, Johnny Paloco. Zaxby out."

"Back to the Big Room," Straker said, glancing again at his chrono and inserting his own comlink. The others followed. "Indy, how many did we lose?"

"I presume you're referring to those choosing to depart the Breakers?"

"Right."

"Nineteen."

Straker stopped dead in the corridor. Loco dodged him with a yelp, and Engels bumped into him. "Only nineteen effectives?"

"Eight effectives from the active forces, plus family members. A few more from the reserves might trickle in."

"Cosmos! I'd expected hundreds to desert us, maybe thousands."

Loco slapped Straker's back with a grin. "Told you, boss. They love you, though it beats the shit out of me why."

Straker rubbed his jaw. "Me too, sometimes. Don't let me ever forget it."

Engels poked Straker in the chest. "Loco might. I won't."

"Good." Straker kissed her. "Come on."

Once in the Big Room, Straker took the stage again. For those present and those with vidlink available, it would help to see him. Full vid provided a sense of the speaker impossible on mere audio.

"Thanks to everyone who decided to stay—that's most of you, as I notice only a few vacancies in the ranks. You have one last chance, right now. If you're not sure, walk away." Straker let the silence stretch.

Nobody moved.

"All right. Let's get ready to fight."

A rumble of excitement spread through the room, a few cheers and yells, quickly suppressed by growling noncoms.

“Indy, distribute the preset orders from all annexes, including Annex Zulu.” Sections of orders and annexes appeared on screens around the room, comlinks beeped, and those with active brainlinks found themselves staring at optical HUDs.

“Ladies and gentlemen—and others,” Straker nodded at a nearby Ruxin neuter, one of the small alien community within the Breakers, “we have between six and twenty-four hours until the Republic task force arrives. They could hit us with railgun ordnance and missiles sooner than that. Until we’re certain, we’re treating this as a combat operation and the task force as the enemy. If they aren’t, we’ll all have a beer and a good laugh. If they are, we have to be ready to win as quickly, decisively, and cheaply as possible. That’s what Annex Zulu is for. Trust the plan and trust each other, and we’ll all make it through.”

Colonel Winter stood once more. “Sir—then what?”

“Then what, what?”

“Once we beat these sons-of-bitches, what then?”

Very conscious of the ticking chrono, Straker forced himself to answer calmly. There weren’t a lot of hours left for talking.

But making sure everyone was on board and pulling in the same direction was more important than minutes right now. “Then we’re outcasts from the Republic, at least until Steel and the Victory Party are out of power and we can smooth things over with whomever takes their place. They’ll treat us as rebels and mutineers. They’ll hunt us down if we let them. We’ll make our own way, find our own place out there.”

“Where?”

Straker gestured widely, as if taking in all of space. “It’s a big galaxy. There are hundreds of billions of stars. Republic space only contains two thousand or so, with twelve or thirteen hundred inhabited planets. There are independent human worlds out in the frontier, and uncounted aliens. We’ll find a place for ourselves, a new home for our families. That, I promise you.”

Spontaneous applause broke out, and Straker let it run until it began to die. Then he waved it down. “Get to work. Carry on.”

Colonel Winter approached him as he stepped off the stage and spoke stiffly. “Sir, I’m sorry if I—”

“No need to apologize, Colonel. It’s one of your responsibilities to ask the hard questions your troops won’t.”

“Not in public, sir. But it seemed—”

“An extraordinary situation. Agreed. In the future, though—”

“I’ll disagree in private.”

Straker put out his hand. “Keep on doing what you’re doing, Colonel. I have full confidence in you, otherwise I wouldn’t have put you in charge of First Battalion.”

“Thank you, sir.” Winter saluted and withdrew.

“One of the naturals,” Loco said at Straker’s elbow. He was referring to mechsuit pilots chosen from the general population rather than genetically engineered for the job. “He doesn’t have the highest scores.”

“High enough—and I wanted a leader first, not just a pilot. Too many of the physical jocks only want to drive their suits and shoot things. This guy takes initiative, thinks outside the box.”

“He’s like you, you mean.”

Straker grunted. “Better strong horses I have to rein in than weak ones I have to put the spurs to.”

“That’s why you keep me around.”

“Guess so. And we’ll need that initiative if Zulu is to work. If we’re lucky, the casualties will be low. If not...”

“We could lose everything.”

“Everything but our families. They matter more than we do. That’s our calling, Loco. To put our bodies and blood between innocent civilians and the enemy.”

Loco’s jaw dropped and his eyes filled with mock hero-worship. “Oh my, oh my, Liberator, sir! Can I have your autograph?”

“Smartass. You know I’m right.”

Loco sobered. “Of course you’re right. You get all pompous in the face of danger. Carla worries. Heiser gets to work, Gurung starts sharpening his knife... I laugh and cut up. You want me to change?”

“No, not really.”

“Good, ’cause I ain’t gonna. Somebody needs to lighten the mood or we’ll all die of terminal earnestness.”

“I doubt that will kill us.” Straker slapped Loco’s shoulder. “Carry on, General. Go crack the whip.”

“Aye aye, Your Liberatorship.” Loco jogged off to check up on his commanders and their progress.

Straker resisted the urge to do the same, but over the years he’d come to accept the wisdom of allowing himself to be the figurehead and inspiration for his troops. Loco and the officers under him could be his hammers, exerting pressure where things needed to get moving. Instead, he stepped over to where Commander Sinden was supervising the ops-intel team maintaining the super-sized Common Operating Picture holograms, along with their secondary holotanks and screens displaying specific subsets of data.

In the big holo he saw the inbound ships, along with all the other significant items within the star system, which were few. Culloden was a recent colony on the edge of settled space, and well away from the Opters, so it hadn’t been occupied during the Hive War. It also happened to be within an easy sidespace jump of the Starfish Nebula, where Freenix’s secret Ruxin habitats and the still-undiscovered Freiheit colony maintained their clandestine existence.

As a new colony, Culloden didn’t yet have industry around either of the system’s gas giants, except for one hydrogen skimmer which collected enough fuel isotopes for local use. The planet, second from its star—so technically it was Culloden-2—had a few communications satellites, a dozen captured asteroids parked in orbit, and a growing space industry including one small shipyard, along with support for the miners and manufactories.

In short, it had nothing with which to defend itself—other than Breaker assets.

Those consisted of three brigades of about six thousand troops each. They were organized identically into four battalions each, three combat and one headquarters-and-support. The only differences between the active First Brigade and the reserve Second and Third were the edge on their training, and the presence of mechsuits in First. During the military drawdown, Straker had managed to get all the Republic’s remaining mechsuits and pilots transferred to the Breakers, as long as he agreed to pay for everything out of Breaker funds.

He’d gladly picked up the tab.

Now, he had over two hundred of the best ground combat machines ever built, and more than three hundred qualified pilots. He’d had the rebuilt

manufacturing depot brought to Culloden from Sparta, along with those of its workforce who wanted to join the Breakers. And, he still had the small, secret factory on Freiheit making parts and ammunition.

While Straker couldn't say he'd foreseen this situation, exactly, he believed in being prepared, and independent of the increasingly unreliable regular forces. He was very glad of that now.

The hologram also showed the Breakers' twenty-one fast military transports, capable of planetside operation. These were normally used for trade, and moving supplies and equipment—and, in an emergency, for evacuation of personnel. They were now on the ground, being loaded.

"Everything on track?" Straker asked Commander Sinden.

Her expression soured slightly and she gestured toward Colonel Keller, the divisional logistics officer from Sachsen, as if to say, ask her.

"Right." And Sinden *was* right. As the Breakers' chief of intelligence, it was her job to keep an eye on the enemy, not to track friendly operations, and certainly not to keep tabs on ship loading. Also, as a genetically engineered brainiac, Sinden was short on tact, long on expertise.

Straker stepped over to Colonel Keller and her team busily plying their consoles, some with brainlinks hardwired into the operating system.

"Progress report?"

The pinch-faced older woman spoke with a Sachsen accent. "We're ninety-six percent on or ahead of schedule. A few speedbumps, but nothing we can't handle."

"What's our margin for delay?"

"One hundred nineteen minutes, minimum. We're fourteen minutes behind the Annex Zulu schedule. It looks like the enemy is slowing to go into orbit. That gives us several hours more. In short, I'm confident we'll hit all the marks."

"Excellent. Carry on."

In the holo, the first of the transports lofted toward its rendezvous with the *Independence*. That ship's lifters and dropships were already busily shuttling people and equipment up from the surface, but the transports could hold far more. With twenty thousand troops and an equal number of civilians to get into space, along with supplies and equipment, the Breakers needed every kilo of lift.

In her role as overall commander of the tiny Breakers fleet, Engels would be already aboard the *Independence*, making sure all ships were in

place and ready. Loco should be doing the same for the combat units, each with the right loadout of equipment and each commander fully briefed on their individual roles and missions. Heiser would be keeping the troops informed and smoothing the inevitable ruffled feathers, while Colonel Winter was preparing the mechsuiters for their particular role in the coming action.

Zaxby, after his initial dramatic entry, had vanished again, incommunicado. Well, he knew his part in the violent impending drama. As long as he showed, with his forces, on time and on target...

It was all so complex. Straker wondered whether he'd made Annex Zulu too complicated. It reminded him of Engels's type of plan, with many interlocking parts rather than a simple ground force execution... but if he was to keep casualties down, it had to be this way.

Two hours of tense waiting later, Commander Sinden reported to him. "The enemy ships have cut acceleration and are beginning decel on impellers alone."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning they're opening up their options. They can take up parking orbits, but they're retaining enough velocity to make a fast pass if they need to."

"How will this affect our potential courses of action?"

Sinden manipulated the holo, one hand on her console, one holding the untethered cursor control. "Here's their baskets." She highlighted color-coded areas defining areas the enemy could navigate to. "And here are ours." The holo added areas where the Breaker ships could reach, also color coded by time and distance.

"And the overlap?"

"We're continually updating in realtime, but here's our best projection." The graphics moved forward into the future, to eventually show overlapping three-dimensional Venn diagrams of possibilities. "If they react as expected, and if everyone hits their marks properly..." Sinden's tone made it clear she was skeptical about that. "The action will take place here."

"Looks good."

"That's a big 'if,' sir. We're assuming they won't simply open fire."

Straker rubbed his face. She was right. He was talking a big risk. Not as big as it looked—the Breakers had a few tricks up their sleeves—but still,

thousands could die in an eyeblink if he guessed wrong. “Your analysis? How do you rate the odds, Nancy?”

Sinden squeezed her eyes shut a couple of times, no doubt accessing her optical HUD and brainlink implants. “High confidence, but high statistical margin of error. We don’t know enough about Steel’s thinking, or that of this task force commander. Would Steel give extermination orders, even against civilians?”

“My gut says no—not yet,” Straker replied. “He can’t be sure that a record of what happens here doesn’t make it back to the newsnets, and he doesn’t have complete control yet. Proof he fired on unarmed fleeing civilians could turn the tide against him. No, he’ll want to capture them as trophies—and as hostages to force us to comply.”

“I do hope we’re right, sir.”

“Me too. We’re gambling here, Nancy, but the payoff is big, and we need it.”

“Pascal’s Wager, sir?”

“Always. Bet a little to win a lot.”

Four hours later, the presumed-enemy task force had lit its fusion engines to decelerate, apparently to take up orbit. There was still no answer to constant Breaker hails.

As Straker stepped onto the final lifter with the last of the command and staff, he glanced around at the aerospace field, empty of all possible equipment except for a row of two dozen old, non-operational mechsuits parked at the edge of the pads. These stood open and abandoned, apparently left there for lack of lift.

The people who’d decided to leave the Breakers, plus a few non-Breaker visitors caught by the situation, had departed in ground transports with universal medical markings and noncombatant transponders, heading toward the empty Breakers recreational complex on the south coast of the continent. That would put them out of harm’s way when the shit hit the fan.

On the lifter, Straker wiggled backward into his open half-ton battlesuit. It was a new Ripper, an upgraded, top-of-the-line model unique to the Breakers. This command version had mechsuit-quality sensors and C3I functions.

He was about to close it when his sister Mara—not only a medical doctor, but Surgeon General of the Breakers—approached, an injection gun in her hand. “Your new biotech.”

“Dammit,” Straker said, and held out a bare arm. This was the one part of Annex Zulu he really didn’t like. Mara’s experimental biotech—supposedly proven and tested, though until now never distributed—was based on the best parts of the Hok parasite template. No distinctive ugly pebbled skin, no destruction of free will, but enhanced strength, speed, toughness and healing.

He’d considered not taking it. What if it affected his mental processes after all? But he was going to take part in the fighting, and he’d mandated it for all the Breakers going into direct combat. He couldn’t tell others to accept it and yet refuse it himself. If it worked as Mara promised, it would increase combat effectiveness and save lives.

Maybe his own.

After the sting of the injection, he waited, but felt nothing. “How long will it take?”

“Three to four hours before the initial effects. You shouldn’t feel too much difference inside your Ripper. Remember, though, when you step outside, you’ll have to use less strength, especially with delicate things. The test subjects were breaking glasses and snapping off handles for a day or two, until they got used to it.”

“Understood.”

Mara kissed his cheek. “Mainly, though, you’ll be more resistant to damage, just like a Hok. Combined with your genetic engineering, you’ll be the baddest thing on two legs, oh brother of mine. Don’t get a big head.”

“Bigger head, you mean?”

“I wasn’t gonna say that, but yeah, you jock fathead. Now go kick some ass.”

“Consider it kicked, you brainiac pest. Hate you, sis.” Straker closed the suit up and booted up the brainlink connection.

“Hate you too!” Mara whirled out of the cargo bay to take her seat as the lifter rose through the atmosphere.

“You good, sir?” Sergeant Steiner, his bodyguard since the death of Redwolf, was already suited up and injected.

“I’m fine. How about you? Feeling any effects?”

“I was one of the test subjects. I’ve had it for months. No problems.”

Straker grunted, not entirely reassured. The man was a crack battlesuiter, but not much of a thinker or talker. Loco had selected him from hundreds of volunteers for the position. Straker would’ve guessed Loco had

picked another smartass like himself, but no. Maybe he didn't want the competition.

Brainlinked, Straker expanded his consciousness within the Ripper and found it nearly the equal of his Jackhammer mechsuit. He had an automatic FTL datalink with the Breaker network that should keep him in touch with everyone and everything also linked. His SAI filtered what he needed according to complex personalized protocols, preventing him from being overwhelmed with inputs.

He selected the overall system view, barely noticing as the lifter he occupied was brought on board the ship in orbit and parked in its cargo bay. In his VR-HUD, he saw the task force and the Breaker ships, now engaged in a slow-motion dance of physics and probabilities.

Soon the *Independence* flagship, fast and heavily armed, led the way at right angles to the task force. It stayed easily out of effective range, helped by the fact that if the enemy tried to target her with their spinal primary weaponry, they would have to alter their angle of maneuver, losing efficiency as they chased her. No, she was completely safe.

Behind the flagship trailed the twenty-one transports, who lugged along under maximum civilian acceleration, plus a five percent overload. Everyone was on a right-angle course to the enemy task force, forcing their opponents to turn hard if they wanted to intercept.

The confusion of lines and numbers on the plotting screens showed the Breaker transports wouldn't all make it.

The clock was running out. Whatever Steel's fleet planned to do, they were about to do it.

Chapter 4

Admiral Engels, commanding the Breakers fleet

On the bridge of the flagship *Independence*, Carla Engels struggled to focus on the situation. She hadn't engaged in real fleet combat—even ship-to-ship fighting—in years. Despite plenty of brainlinked VR-simulator time, she felt rusty.

Having her family and the rest of the civilians fleeing through space didn't help either. She was still worried about Straker's plan. Everything turned on the knife-edge of probability predictions and on the Breaker leadership's belief in what the enemy would do.

"Incoming vidlink," Lieutenant Tanaka said from Comms.

There was no doubt Indy could handle most of the bridge functions, but Engels had insisted the AI let the humans do their jobs, if only to keep them in practice. She still remembered when Indy, inhabiting the *Indomitable*, had refused to destroy enemy ships.

And, she vividly remembered being Vic's prisoner inside the VR-matrix. Deep down, she couldn't fully trust artificial intelligence.

"It's from the task force," Tanaka continued, clearly surprised. "Urgent, eyes-only—the message is for you personally, Admiral Engels."

"Me personally?" Engels glanced around, and then made up her mind. "In the bridge ready room."

Once alone in the side room, the screen came to life, showing a face Engels hadn't seen in over two years.

Ellen Gray.

The dark-skinned, frowning woman wore a captain's uniform, with blue-and-red Victory Party tabs on it. The tabs were another indication of how politicized the Republic military had become. Those who bore the symbols could expect favored treatment. Those without would see their careers stalled.

"You used to be a commodore, Ellen," Engels said harshly, without preamble. "Things not working out as planned? Your new Party not as friendly as you thought?"

"Shut up and listen, Carla," Gray said in a low voice, glancing to the side. "I've only got a moment. They took away my squadron and my SDN when I dragged my feet about joining the Party. I'm commanding a cruiser

again, but that's only because I swallowed my pride and finally signed up—for this mission only. Because of you."

Engels swallowed her own pride and stopped herself from attacking Gray. The other woman had rebuffed Engels' offer to join the Breakers, and that still stung. It seemed she'd tried to walk the line between loyalty to the Republic and the ever-growing influence of the Party. Now, she was obviously communicating clandestinely.

"Okay," she said, "talk to me."

"This task force has orders to take you all into custody," Gray said.

"We figured that."

"But what you don't know is that Hayson Niedern's gotten his flag back, and he's in charge. He has orders to kill anyone rather than let them escape. Not that he needs those orders. He still hates you and Straker for what you did. He's itching for revenge."

Engels licked her lips. "It's that bad?"

"They assigned the most fanatical Party loyalists to these ships, Carla. I only got in because I've distanced myself from you and the Breakers. I spouted the Party line, they needed another ship and a good captain—and I called in my last personal favors. I did it so I could warn you, and I'm risking everything. I wish I'd joined you when I had the chance."

Engels struggled with herself. What if this was a trick designed to get her to tell the enemy what they were planning? But no. Ellen Gray had been a friend, closer than a friend. Like a sister, despite their disagreement about how to deal with the politics. She had to trust Gray wouldn't betray her.

"Ellen, thanks, but listen. We already have a plan. Don't do anything crazy, like firing on your own ships, or you might knock everything out of whack. Not until you're sure of your actions. It all depends on Niedern believing the picture we're presenting to him."

"What picture?"

"I—I can't tell you, Ellen. You'll have to make your own judgments when the time comes, otherwise you might make some weird move. And —"

"Sorry, I have to go." Gray's vidlink dropped suddenly.

She must have spotted a Loyalty Officer nearby, Engels realized. The situation was just like the Mutuality all over again, with their Commissars. She'd heard the Lazarus clones had made a comeback as political watchdogs, and no good could come of that.

“Indy, did you listen in?”

“Not as such,” the AI replied. “The vidlink was for you only. I have, however, stored a sealed recording. Shall I review it for myself?”

“Yes, go ahead.”

“Interesting,” Indy said after a slight pause. “Unfortunately, in Captain Gray’s desire to help, she merely introduced another variable into an already volatile situation. I confess I’m at a loss. Does this change the plan?”

Engels agonized, but eventually said, “No. No, it can’t. We proceed as if she and her ship will act belligerently. We can’t depend on anything else.”

“Understood.”

“Can you put me through to Derek?”

“That would be risky. His suit’s FTL comlink is too short-ranged. Ordinary radio would probably be noticed. Tightbeam laser is not completely undetectable. We can encrypt it, but the enemy might know we’re communicating.”

“That won’t matter. Naturally we’d be communicating. Put me through.”

“Comlinking now via tightbeam laser. There will be over twenty seconds of lag.”

“Okay.”

The half-minute seemed endless, but eventually she got through.

“Straker here.”

“Derek, it’s me. There’s a long lag, so listen until I’m done. I’ve gotten confirmation that the approaching fleet is hostile. Ellen Gray managed to get herself assigned to command a cruiser in the task force. She called to warn me on an FTL vidlink, but she didn’t say her crew was with her, so we have to assume they’re Party loyalists. I told her we have a plan, that she shouldn’t do anything until she’s sure of the situation. That’s all I told her. I know you can’t pull any punches, but maybe... I don’t know. On the off chance you can talk to whoever tries to take down the cruisers, maybe you can pass the word. Not to go easy, I guess, but to make sure to accept a surrender as quick as possible. I’m certain she’s on our side. I don’t see her lying to me about this. That’s all. Engels, over.”

Straker’s reply seemed to take forever to arrive. “I understand. I’ll pass the word, but like you said, we can’t go easy on anybody until they surrender. Even then, I wouldn’t put it past them to fake a surrender. We

don't know how fanatical these people are, what kind of defenses they have, or whether they have Hok with them. So, no promises. Thanks for the warning, though. Straker out."

Engels sat on the edge of the conference table for a few more minutes, trying to think her way out of the box she was in. No matter how much Engels wanted to help her, Gray was on her own. If she got caught in the crossfire, it would be an ironic tragedy.

Fortunes of war.

Engels returned to the bridge and examined the superb holotank there. Built specifically for the flagship and improved even more by the AI, it was the best piece of equipment she'd ever seen, and the biggest outside of a fortress.

It showed *Independence* leading a gaggle of twenty-one transport ships toward flatspace, clearly reaching for safety in transit to sidespace FTL travel. Once transited, ships in the strange dimension of sidespace couldn't be tracked or intercepted.

So, the enemy had to catch their quarries in normal space—that is, in curved space, the area around the star most affected by its mass and gravity.

And they would.

By the numbers, according to the sensors, whether enemy or friendly, most of the transports wouldn't escape. The *Independence* would easily make it out, and perhaps the first three of the transports, but not the last eighteen. If the Republic task force—call it what it was, the Party task force—didn't know yet, they would soon.

In fact, it would be glaringly obvious.

She hoped Niedern would be so blinded by ambition and his desire for revenge that he wouldn't wonder too strenuously why the flagship *Independence* wasn't at the rear, covering the evacuation, instead of at the front leading it.

He had to know of the flagship's fantastic defensive capabilities—thousands of AI-controlled point-defense beams and over five hundred aerospace drones with which to shoot down missiles or railgun projectiles, not to mention the new shields based on Crystal tech—but would he look for deception? Or would he assume the Breakers were cowardly, gone soft after years in garrison, and were only eager to save themselves at the expense of unarmed transports obviously packed full of civilians?

As the hours passed, the calculus of position brought the enemy inevitably closer to the tail end of the fleeing convoy. The Breakers made no effort to tighten up or protect their transports. It was every vessel for itself, each ship's civilian-grade drive overloaded, fleeing desperately.

Engels and the rest of the bridge crew watched with dry mouths as the trailing transport came into range of the leading destroyers, the fastest enemy ships. Would they fire, brutally burning down an undefended vessel? Or shoot carefully to disable? Or even use their superior speed and weaponry to come alongside and grapple to board?

The lead destroyer passed from long into medium range, and then to short. They could blast the transport at any time... but they didn't. No, Niedern would be ordering the transport to be seized intact, full of Breaker families and civilians.

Hostages.

The destroyer put a shot across the transport's bow and broadcast a stand-down order on all channels. The transport ignored the warning, and a second one, but didn't evade. Eventually, the destroyer used a secondary laser to disable her fusion drive. Without it, she coasted, still accelerating slightly on impellers, but functionally helpless.

How clever would Niedern be? He was a competent, if unimaginative, fleet commander. She expected him to do the smart thing. Instead of his destroyers taking immediate possession of the ships they caught and disabled, they raced ahead to catch more ships. That way, his fleet could follow and snatch up prizes at their leisure after the coming battle—if there was to be one.

Engels dared to smile. All of this was according to the rebel plan.

"Can we tell if the Ruxins cleared the recon drones yet?" she asked.

"We've had indications of transits and weapons fire," the sensors officer replied, "but it's all very faint. If we weren't looking, we'd never see them. The enemy shouldn't—especially as until recently their own drives were blinding them to everything behind them."

"Understood."

The first, most important mission of the Ruxin stealth-skimmers Zaxby brought was to ensure no word of what transpired here returned to the far-flung Republic interstellar comms network. The skimmers should have transited in exactly where the enemy task force had first appeared and immediately identified all the waiting spy and courier drones they'd

dropped. Those robot drones, seeing “Republic” ships squawking proper IFF codes, would allow the skimmers to approach—and destroy them.

Once they took care of that problem, the stealthy skimmers, undetectable at a distance, would sneak up on the enemy task force, aiming to intercept any other courier drones they managed to launch or drop in their wake. If necessary, they could attack from ambush.

The hours stretched by as the destroyers climbed up the trail of fleeing ships one by one, eventually disabling eighteen. The first three transports managed to get into sidespace, as expected. The *Independence*, lurked out of range in flatspace, apparently impotent. She could jump any time now, but stuck around. The enemy would hopefully calculate that the Breakers were unwilling to risk their flagship, but were remaining in the area to see what happened, frustrated and helpless.

It should all make sense to Niedern.

As the enemy destroyers did the hard work, Niedern’s larger warships matched speeds to the fleeing transports, sidling up to them one by one and grappling them with magnetics. The dreadnoughts grabbed four transports each, positioning them opposite each other against their hulls at the four points of an imaginary compass, so the drive loads would be balanced. Engels was reminded of four smokesticks glued to a cigar.

She checked the chrono. 2240 hours, Culloden time, which was what the Breakers were all using. Twenty minutes to wait.

Twenty minutes to bite her nails.

Twenty minutes of calm before the storm.

The cruisers took charge of two transports each while the destroyers remained on guard. There’d been no way to predict how the enemy would distribute the load, and this wasn’t the best result for the Breakers. It meant the six destroyers would be unencumbered. If handled well by their captains, they could screw up the plan badly, inflicting heavy casualties. They had to be dealt with.

“FTL comlink to Zaxby,” Engels said.

It took a few moments, but eventually the comtech responded.

“Comlink established.”

“Grand Marshal Zaxby here, Admiral Engels. How may I be of service?”

“The drones are cleared?”

“Yes, and we’ve been following the enemy to sweep up any more they’ve dropped. So far, we’ve found none.”

“The destroyers aren’t grappling with any transports. Can you deal with them?”

“Is that a euphemism, Carla Engels? Please be clear.”

Engels sighed. “Attack them at 2300 hours. Destroy them if necessary.”

“It will be necessary. They will not stand down.”

“I know. Destroy them.”

“Destroy the destroyers. That’s pleasantly clear—and nice wordplay, too. My warriors will not fail.”

“Good. Engels out.” She really didn’t feel like talking further about it. Killing didn’t excite her. If there was an alternative, she’d take it—but those ships couldn’t be allowed free rein.

Ironically, she felt helpless and cowardly out here on the *Independence*, playing her role in the plan. She wanted to get in and fight... but she had to sit out here like a big fat decoy. Keep them wondering, keep them guessing, keep them looking at her instead of where the real danger lay.

“Can we detect the skimmers?” she asked.

“Not on passives,” the sensors officer replied. “It would take heavy active scanning to reveal them.”

“Good. If we can’t, they can’t either.”

She wondered what the enemy ships were thinking about the prizes they’d grappled. The Breaker transport captains had orders to passively resist all attempts to break in and board—at least until go-time.

2300 hours was the next half-hour mark after the final transport had been grappled. If the final transport had been captured after 2300, the op would have kicked off at 2330, and so on.

Engels watched with long-range optics and drone cameras. First, the enemy matched up hatches with the transports. They sealed them together with temporary airlocks, then they demanded entry. When they didn’t get it, they began to blast through with their ship’s smallest weapons, or cut through with tools.

Straker was prepared for these moves. He’d figured that if the enemy hadn’t destroyed the transports in space, they probably wouldn’t go in with guns blazing to board. Not against a bunch of civilians. There was no hurry. They’d already won an easy victory, though they’d let the Breakers military

contingent get away on the *Independence*. Niedern would be rubbing his hands and gloating about his hostages.

In fact, she expected a call soon to try to twist her arm. Within minutes, the call came in.

The comms officer swung around in her chair. “Vidlink hail from the enemy flagship, ma’am.”

Right on time. “Everybody remember your briefings and your roles. Ready?” She gave them a moment to compose themselves. “Accept it.”

Admiral Hayson Niedern appeared on the main forward holoscreen. He looked unhealthy and ten years older than when she’d last seen him, but he was the same short, weasel-faced political animal she remembered. He’d been court-martialed right after the Hive War, but had managed to cut a plea deal that preserved his commission and rank. After all, he’d been a “hero” for supervising one successful battle against the Opter-Crystal alliance. He had his supporters.

Since then, he’d become an enthusiastic creature of the Victory Party. Apparently, he’d been rehabilitated and rewarded with this important command.

“Niedern? What do you want?”

“I have your civilians, Lieutenant Engels.”

The man was so petty, he refused to acknowledge the rank she’d earned during the Liberation Wars. Of course, he was trying to get under her skin—but she would play along as the seconds ticked down. Around her, the bridge crew, some of whom would be visible to Niedern, showed shock and concern.

“*Admiral* Engels, if you please, Admiral Niedern. What’s the meaning of these unlawful actions?”

“It’s you Breakers who’re acting unlawfully, *Miss* Engels. I order you to stand down and be boarded. You and your personnel are still subject to military law, and your equipment is Republic materiel, not your personal property. That includes the flagship you’re sitting in.”

“We received no lawful orders until now, so we’re not in violation of anything.”

I look weak by playing his game of words, she thought, but the longer I keep him talking, the better.

“You’ve received them now. The orders come straight from the Prefect.”

“I don’t know any Prefect. The Prefect of the Victory Party? Is that an office specified in the Constitution?”

“The Prime Minister, then. Same thing. You know what I mean. I order you to stand down in the name of the duly elected civilian government.”

Engels snorted. “Duly elected my ass.”

“The results were certified. We’re military officers, Carla. That means we follow orders.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Then I can’t guarantee the safety of the... *guests* we’ve recently picked up. Many of my people are itching to get their hands on some traitors.”

“You’d threaten children?”

“Oh, the children will be fine, I assure, you. Their parents, now, might be at risk from some of my more... enthusiastic ground troops. You know how the grunts are—hard to control in the heat of battle once they get their blood up.”

“Funny, Straker never had that problem with *his* grunts.”

Niedern scowled. “Times have changed. I can only guarantee civilian safety if your military forces stand down. Then, your families can all be together and happy. I promise that everyone will be treated well. You’ll be resettled on a nice, pleasant, safe planet.”

“To never leave again.”

“Individuals might be rehabilitated, assuming the Party approves. We can’t very well have traitors running around the Republic causing trouble, can we?”

“I don’t know, Hayson—how do *you* do it?”

Niedern folded his hands on his paunch. “You know, Carla, I think I need to talk to someone who’s actually in charge. Is Assault Captain Straker around?”

“You’ll talk to me, Niedern. I’m in charge.”

“Not in charge of much, it seems to me. You’ve got one warship, even if she is a beauty. A ship you stole from the people of the Republic.”

“That depends on who history will judge as the real traitors here, Hayson. I’m betting on you and your jackbooted thugs in blue. Or is it Mutuality red this week? Gives new meaning to your ‘checkered past.’ The colors change, but the assholes never do.”

Niedern’s scowl deepened, and he cut the audio and turned away, talking to someone off-screen. Probably getting instructions from his

Loyalty Officer.

One more minute. Just one more minute. If troops from the captor ships had cut through into the transports by now, they would be finding the airlocks deserted, and more sealed doors. Then they'd have to cut some more, and some more. It would take time for enemy marines, probably led by Hok cannon fodder, to break down every hatch and search the transports.

Only one more damned minute.

The chrono ticked down.

Keep him talking, keep him involved, she told herself.

Engels continued, assuming Niedern could still hear. "We're not going to give ourselves up. You don't have everyone, and no matter how it pains us, we won't be taken prisoner by your brainwashed jackbooted thugs. If you'd been smart, Steel would've sent someone like Admiral Benota, someone I can trust. Someone I might have listened to. But I know what an animal you are, Hayson, and I swear, when I get my hands on you..."

Niedern sneered. "You'll what?"

Engels straightened, dropping the fearful, fretful act. "No, strike that. What I meant to say was, when *Derek Straker* gets his hands on you, I think you'll find you've made grave mistake."

2300 hours.

Engels grinned. "See you soon."

Aboard Niedern's bridge, all hell broke loose. She deliberately did not cut the vidlink, but instead sat back to watch.

Chapter 5

General Straker, aboard the militarized transport *Caribou*.

When Straker's HUD chrono hit precisely 2300 hours, he opened the cargo bay door on the transport ship where he'd been waiting—number 20 out of the 21 vessels, the *Caribou*. Number 21, the rearmost, had been empty, on robot control, in case the enemy decided to destroy them one by one. It would've been the first to be attacked, and so provide a warning. In that case, the Ruxins would've had to swoop in and attack, and the *Independence* would've hurried back to cover the transports' escape.

The entire op had been an enormous gamble, but it seemed it was paying off—so far.

The cargo bay doors swung open to show the curve of an armored dreadnought hull twenty meters off. Straker leaped into space and flipped his body around. He put his boots forward and land with a *clunk*. Magnetics allowed him to race along the surface toward the nearest cargo bay door.

Behind him, a full company of Breaker battlesuiters followed.

Across the task force, grappled Breaker transports would be opening their doors. Every voluminous cargo bay would be vomiting forth hundreds of troops—some were his tame Hok, some were marines, the most critical were those mechsuiters in borrowed battlesuits. Behind the initial assault surge, every combat-capable soldier he had, every vehicle driver and gunner and clerk and supply sergeant, had come armed and wearing spacesuits. Every Breaker who could carry a weapon was out here in open space.

Straker found the cargo bay doors of the enemy ship. The armor was far too thick to blast through without a nuke—and a nuke would kill the assaulting Breakers. But he'd long ago considered this situation, and Annex Zulu covered it.

Next to the external access panel he set down a square module the size and shape of a forty-kilo kettle-bell weight. It was mostly power supply, but at its heart was a short-range transmitter designed to blast an overload of electronic demands straight into the shielded computer that controlled the doors.

In other words, a fast, forcible hack. The devices had been designed by Indy, Frank Murdock and Zaxby.

The hack could never have worked if the dreadnought had its reinforcement field active, but that was impossible with the transport grappled onto its hull—another advantage of Annex Zulu.

Straker triggered the thing. A moment later, the warship's hull split along its seam and the cargo doors swung open, allowing access to the vulnerable interior.

Each transport carried about a thousand troops. The average dreadnought had a crew of around the same number, but only fifty to a hundred of them would be ground troops, like Hok or marines. Straker had the advantage, but as some ancient philosopher once said, "It ain't over till it's over."

Inside the ship, Straker used his blaster to blow open the cargo bay's internal airlock. His troops were vacuum-capable, so letting the air out of the interior would work to his advantage. He hammered the twisted metal farther open with one armored gauntlet and led the way inside.

He was immediately smashed back by railgun impacts, and his HUD screamed warnings at him. His battlesuit's sensors registered pain in his right arm, which quickly subsided. His suit's right arm seemed to be completely down.

What could aim and fire so quickly, and be unaffected by vacuum? Must be an autogun, possibly a battle-bot. Somebody, or perhaps the ship's SAI, had reacted quickly, activating the internal defenses.

Straker triggered his wide channel and broadcast to everyone who could hear, "Full breach, full breach. Hard resistance, automated, so no holds barred, Breakers. Maximum assault protocols."

Following his own orders, Straker waved forward a battlesuiter with a rocket launcher. The soldier angled the weapon at the opening and triggered it. The smart projectile should stabilize itself in the passageway beyond and try to destroy any threat. It would be computer against computer.

The autogun computer won, this time, and the next—but not the third.

While others took point on the assault, Straker examined his damaged suit, holding up his right arm—he thought.

Unfortunately, his arm now seemed to end at the elbow.

Yet, he felt no pain. The suit had injected pain-blockers and had tightened in tourniquet mode, but even so... he'd been badly hit in battles before, and never felt this sense of detachment, this... nothingness. It was as

if his brain and body simply didn't care about the trauma, and had already moved on, like he'd never even had that arm in the first place.

At some level he knew what was happening, but he might as well have a pane of glass between him and the real world. Yet, this strange detachment allowed him to keep functioning. He felt nothing, and simply didn't care.

His blaster. It was on the deck, damaged and useless. It had been in his right hand when he'd been hit. He'd been foolish to charge in, he now realized within that odd calm. He'd been relying on surprise, but machines couldn't be surprised. Somebody had been clever enough or diligent enough to tell the ship's SAI to activate internal defenses, and it had cost him an arm—and momentum.

"Sir—you're hit!" Sergeant Steiner came into his field of view. He seemed to be at a loss, since his boss was still on his feet, not at all perturbed. "We need to medevac you."

"I'm fine, Sergeant. I can't even feel it. Must be the new biotech. Watch my back—and don't let me do something stupid like that again."

"Roger that, sir," Steiner said. "Regen tanks will fix you right up again. Until then, stay behind me."

"Yes, mother. I'm still on my feet."

Think, Straker, think. Your days of playing point man are long gone. You're a commander now. Issue orders and coordinate. You can still do that.

But he found he didn't need to. Heiser was already giving instructions to the troops in this fight, adjusting the plan to fit the new threat. Instead of trying to battle through doors and hatches, battlesuiters blew holes in the cargo bay walls with their blasters, rockets, or cutting charges. With full breach, maximum assault protocols, they'd make no effort to spare the enemy or equipment. They'd pound everything in sight and expend ordnance prodigiously, then push through in order to keep the momentum going, knocking the enemy off-balance.

Networked HUDs allowed the Breakers to build a coherent picture of the battlespace on the fly. As soon as a ship defense fired or activated, the smart network added it to the common operating picture. In response, the leading Breakers, the elite battlesuiters, attacked the devices from unexpected directions—the other sides of bulkheads, below or above decks. Sometimes they were able to blow holes into maintenance spaces and cut the power. In this way, they methodically burrowed through the dreadnought toward the bridge.

A few live enemies fought back, but clearly, they'd been surprised. Most of the ship's contingent wasn't suited up or armed. They lost precious minutes opening armories and trying to prepare to repel boarders—the last thing they'd expected.

As Straker moved inward and forward, his command HUD linked up with more and more Breakers. It appeared that the dreadnought had grappled with four transports, numbers 18 through 21, three of which were full of Breakers. So, they'd invited three thousand enemy troops onto their ship, expecting only helpless civilians.

One squad of crew, unaccountably brave, managed to man a semi-portable heavy laser and cut down two battlesuiters before being fried by blaster plasma. The automated defenses wounded sixteen Breakers and killed five more, but by the time Straker set foot on the bridge, he counted it a cheap victory. He'd never even fired his replacement blaster, salvaged from the fallen and now carried in his left hand.

Annex Zulu had paid off... so far.

But his FTL comlink seemed inoperative, so he had no idea what was happening elsewhere, in space.

"You," he said, pointing at a quivering enemy lieutenant, "open the ship's network for access."

A pinch-faced man in a fancy, deep-blue uniform with red piping snarled back. "Belay that! Don't collaborate!" His tabs and armband identified him as a Loyalty Officer, and his face twisted in rage as he pointed his sidearm—not at Straker, but at the lieutenant.

Straker put one blaster round into his chest, and his body fell smoking to the deck.

"Let me be perfectly clear," he said through his amplified speakers. "Today, everyone in the Victory Party made themselves my mortal enemy. They threatened my family. Regulars who surrender will be treated as prisoners of war and exchanged, but Party officials are traitors to the Constitution, and thus to the Republic. Anyone not surrendering, I will assume is a Party loyalist." He lifted his blaster. "*Now open that fucking network!*"

The lieutenant tapped out commands on his console with shaking hands, and Straker's HUD registered an open connection with the dreadnought's systems. ERS *Trollheim*, the ship's SAI announced as it reported to Straker.

“*Trollheim*, register me as this ship’s commander, under my biometrics,” Straker said.

“Acknowledged.”

“Lock out all existing crew functions and accesses. I am now the sole individual authorized input.”

“Acknowledged. Executed.”

“Register the following additional personnel as authorized to access command functions.” Straker uploaded a list of key Breaker officers and their identifying data.

“Acknowledged.”

“Put me on shipwide public address.”

“Public address, open.”

“This is General Derek Straker, also known as the Liberator. My troops have taken this ship. If you continue to resist, you will be killed. If you surrender, regular military will be treated in accordance with the laws of war.” He didn’t mention what he might do to Party members—but he wasn’t going to lose any sleep over that omission.

“Breaker fleet officers and watchstanders, report to the bridge. I need people to run our new dreadnought. Fleet noncoms, sort yourselves out and take control of appropriate sections. Ground troops, search all spaces, confine all prisoners, and reorganize for further combat.”

A spacesuited Breaker stepped up to him, doffed his helmet and flipped a casual salute. “Lieutenant Gustav, sir. I’ll take the conn, if you please.”

“Ian, good man. You’re Captain Gustav now. Carry on.”

Gustav sat in the command chair and began issuing orders to the Breaker crew trickling in to take bridge stations.

Straker stayed in brainlink space and continued to interface with the ship’s SAI. “Send a message to the flagship *Independence*.”

“Acknowledged. Waiting for message.”

“Message begins. Straker here. Carla, we’ve taken one dreadnought, ERS *Trollheim*. Trying to establish C4I with the rest of the Breakers. Coordinate via this datalink to the SAI and work your fleet magic. Straker out. Message ends. Transmit.”

“Transmitted.”

That should get move things along.

“Synthesize me an operating picture compatible with my suit and brainlink protocols,” he told the SAI. “Download to my HUD.”

“Acknowledged.”

Soon, an imperfect but useful display of the situation bloomed in Straker’s headspace.

The three dreadnoughts and three cruisers had grappled with the eighteen transports, assuming those transports were full of civilians. This had been the heart and the danger of Straker’s plan—the enemy had to welcome the Breakers aboard, for no warship captain would ever voluntarily let his ship be boarded by superior enemy forces. Had even one discovered the ruse early, that ship might’ve warned the others. They could have then released their grapples and destroyed the transports.

For that reason also, the transports had to trick the enemy into disabling their drives. A transport with functioning engines might have been expected to follow maneuver orders. By forcing the warships to shoot out the engines of the “civilian” transports, Straker had induced them to grapple, expecting to capture civilians and carry the hulks, strapped on, back through sidespace to their destinations.

That also meant every assault had to kick off at one moment, to enable surprise and minimize warning. From what Straker could tell, it had worked. No warships had ungrappled and destroyed transports.

That had been his biggest fear—a thousand troops per transport, slaughtered because of bad timing.

He saw six distinct ships on his display—the capital ships, the dreadnoughts and cruisers. Where were the destroyers? He asked the SAI, which highlighted six other areas of space. “The destroyers have been eliminated as functioning combat units.”

“What happened?”

The SAI chewed on that highly generalized, vague question. “Judging from ship sensor records and residual radiation signatures, it appears antimatter weapons were detonated inside their hulls.”

“Optimize and employ active sensors, concentrating on the areas near the destroyed ships. Highlight any anomalous readings.”

Within seconds, sixteen distinct anomalies appeared in Straker’s HUD. “These anomalies appear to be low-observable ships of frigate class.”

“Designate and match those as Ruxin skimmers. Mark as friendlies.”

“Matched in database. Updated answer to query: the six destroyers were probably rendered nonfunctional by underspace float mines.”

Straker grinned. “And who said SAIs were stupid?”

“Query not understood.”

“Ignore query. Tell me, can you FTL-datalink with the controlling AI of the *Independence*?”

“I can.”

“Do it.”

“Datalinking.”

Straker’s HUD clarified and expanded, filling in detail.

“Hello, General Straker.”

“Hi, Indy. What’s our situation?”

“Remarkably good, General. Six capital ships captured. Regrettably, six destroyers were rendered unsalvageable by Ruxin float mines. However, that was preferable to allowing them to open fire. Our grappled transports were sitting ducks.”

“No need for regrets. Annex Zulu worked as well as we could hope.”

“Indeed. I have informed the civilians of our success, and have passed a list of known casualties to Admiral Engels. Ships are on route to rendezvous in flatspace, pending further movement orders. My small craft and repair bots are assisting with damage control operations. In short, the situation is well in hand.”

“Well in hand.” Straker chuckled as he glanced at the stump of his right arm. He passed his blaster to Steiner and retracted his helmet, and then took a sniff of ship air. The smell of ozone and burned plastics lingered. He expected to feel the usual fatigue of post-combat letdown, but in fact he seemed unaffected, bright, powerful, like he’d just woken up from a good night’s sleep. He was hungry, though. Ravenous, in fact. “This biotech is good stuff. Tell Mara thanks—and that I’ll need a reservation in the regeneration tanks. I’m missing an arm.”

“That may not be necessary,” Indy said. “The parasite should regenerate your missing limb within approximately twelve days. I suggest you report to the infirmary for a protective fitting, and nutritional supplements will be issued.”

“Really? All right, I’ll do that first chance I get. Carry on.”

“Indy out.”

Straker’s stomach rumbled while all around him, Breakers bustled and murmured orders on their comlinks. The bridge holotank showed his fleet assembling around the *Independence*. He looked around for something to do, but frankly, his people were perfectly competent. He’d had five years to

take the best veterans from the Republic and train them the way he wanted them. The only thing they'd lacked was recent action—and now they had that under their belts.

“Steiner, rustle me up a couple field rations, will you? I'm starving.”

“Roger wilco, sir. Sir, you really should report to the infirmary.”

“I'll be fine until I can go aboard the flagship. I'd rather let Mara take a look at this.” He waved his stump.

“At least sit down, sir. You might...”

“Collapse at any minute?” Straker barked a rueful laugh. “Okay, Sergeant. Looks safe enough.” He backed up to an empty bulkhead and sent the command for the suit to crack open. This terminated his brainlink, and suddenly, he did feel tired—and even hungrier. The brainlink itself had masked the symptoms. He should've remembered that.

His head swam. The suit's medical program left a smart tourniquet clamped on his stump. He was fortunate someone had programmed it for that eventuality—probably Murdock. It still seemed weird to look at. His vision tunneled slightly. Did he have a concussion? Steiner was right. He ought to sit down. Let other people run the show.

He took a seat in the flag officer's chair, set on a small raised platform with three extra consoles for an admiral's battle staff. This was a normal setup for a dreadnought, though usually the section remained unused and turned off.

The seat straps were hanging carelessly, as if they'd been unbuckled and left there by its previous occupant.

Steiner handed him a self-heating emergency ration he'd scrounged up from somewhere, along with a flask of standard battle-ade, a rehydrating drink full of nutrients. As he ate, switches seemed to flip in Straker's numbed mind. They lined up slowly, but eventually something became clear.

The flag chair had been in use recently.

A task force like this would have a commodore or admiral in charge.

He or she would command from one of the three dreadnoughts.

Straker had captured a dreadnought.

Odds were one in three that he'd captured the flagship.

Which one was the flagship?

He cleared his throat. “Captain Gustav.”

“Sir?”

“Was this the enemy flagship?”

“Yes, sir.”

“So... where the hell is Admiral Niedern?”

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Chapter 6

General Straker, aboard the captured dreadnought *Trollheim*

In response to Straker's inquiry about the location of this captured flagship's admiral, Captain Gustav glanced around as if he'd misplaced something. "I'll find out, sir." He issued orders to thoroughly search all ship spaces for anyone hiding out—to open every locker, every maintenance hatch and cupboard.

While the orders were carried out, Straker finished the emergency ration and devoured another. His head cleared, and by the time four Breakers arrived escorting a short, sallow man with Party tabs on his striped admiral's epaulets, he felt like his old self again.

"My, my, what have we here?" Straker said. "Admiral Niedern?"

Niedern seemed to collapse in upon himself, and wouldn't meet Straker's eyes. "Straker," he snarled through gritted teeth.

"I knew you'd managed to dodge a court-martial conviction, but I hadn't paid much attention to you from then on. I see you've risen high in the Victory Party."

Niedern still said nothing. A shrewd politician first, he clearly knew that he was all out of cards to play, and he was also out of chips at the Breakers Casino.

"I should have you tried and executed," Straker continued.

That got a rise out of him. "On what charge?"

"Attempted murder of civilians, for one."

"I never intended to harm civilians."

"Yet you thought they were aboard these transports."

"I was trying to take them into protective custody."

"Reckless endangerment and kidnapping, then. I don't suppose you thought to wipe your personal and command logs? They'll make for interesting reading."

Niedern paled, but blustered on. "No Republic court will convict me, and I won't recognize any other."

"Cold comfort when you're dead."

"You wouldn't."

Straker reached up to stroke his chin, but he realized he was missing a hand. He waved the stump at Niedern. "Funny how weasels always depend

on the ethics of others, but have none themselves. In this case, though, you happen to be right. I won't execute you. In fact, I'm thinking of letting you go."

Hope appeared in Niedern's eyes, quickly replaced by skepticism, and then shrewdness. "You want something in return. You want to make a deal."

"I knew you'd understand. But since I can't trust you to do anything after I let you go, it'll have to be something you can give me now. What might that be?" Straker wasn't sure, himself, but figured Niedern would come up with something if it would save his skin.

Yet why let Niedern go?

Two reasons. One, Niedern was a known quantity. If he ever came after the Breakers again, better that it was him rather than some unknown, possibly more dangerous opponent.

Two, it was likely Niedern's masters in the Victory Party would look unkindly on his failure and punish him with far worse than anything Straker would. Maybe they'd make him into a Hok.

Niedern considered. "I'll give you everything I know on your enemies and the Party."

"Not worth enough. We're heading so far out they won't be able to reach us, and we won't bother them."

Niedern face twisted in disbelief. "Oh, I'm supposed to believe the great Liberator is giving up?"

Straker shrugged. "Believe what you want. I gave humanity its chance at freedom and justice, and look how they repaid me. I was a fool to think people would learn from history. The Victory Party is just the same old tyrant in new clothes, with the same old promises. Give up your rights and freedoms in return for security, entertainment and comfort. In a generation or two, the system will self-destruct. In fact, from what I figure, it will self-destruct sooner without me around as a scapegoat and focal point."

"They'll never stop hunting you. They're afraid of you. The name of Liberator Straker could rally another revolt."

Straker showed his teeth, inspired to bluff and bluster a bit. "Fine. Let them waste resources and look like fools as they fail. The tighter their grasp, the more minds will slip through their fingers. And when the time is good, when the fruit is ripe, I'll return—and this time, I'll do it right. I'll purge every Victory Party member and loyalist, separate the wheat from the

chaff. I'll rule directly for as long as it takes to return humanity to the path of freedom and justice."

"That sounds like tyranny!"

"Sounds like Steel, anyway. Would you rather have him or me?"

Niedern's face pinched further, as if he wanted to say something, but was afraid to—which was a combination of irony and stupidity. Straker would always let a man have his say.

He doubted if Steel would. "The Prefect" was supposed to be touchy, ruled by whim, having people charged with crimes for simple mistakes or expressing opposing views. Karst hadn't been that way before he became Steel, but power corrupts...

He'd have to remember that about his own power. Keeping it in mind was a good preventative.

Of course Straker had no intention of returning to seize power, especially not as a direct ruler, but he'd realized something. Niedern wouldn't be able to help himself. He'd repeat everything Straker said, and Steel would believe it, because it's what Steel would do in his place. It's what Steel no doubt wanted—to be an absolute dictator. A guy like him couldn't conceive of anyone turning down such a position—despite the evidence of his own eyes that Straker'd already done that twice.

That paranoid belief would gnaw at Steel, would make him waste time and money chasing a ghost, and would hasten his inevitable downfall—all for the cheap price of letting Niedern go.

Now, to set the hook deeply and feed that paranoia... "Remember, what we did this time, we can do again. We have better tech than the Republic—alien tech we kept for ourselves, just like the gravity blocker. You see we blew up six destroyers without them getting off a shot, and captured six capital ships. We have the only sane AI ever built, and she's already able to do some of the things the Crystals did. We'll destroy or capture anyone else Steel sends against us."

"Then what do you want from me?" Niedern said bleakly.

"I'm feeling magnanimous, Admiral, so I'll take your deal. Tell us everything you know, and when I'm satisfied, I'll let you go. You know I'm not a murderer, but by the Unknowable Creator, I am a killer. I want Steel to know that. I want him to know the price he'll pay for threatening me and mine. You'll be the one to tell him."

"If I do, he'll kill *me*."

“You made your bed, Hayson. You lie in it. You can always run away to the frontier. Change your name. Do something else with your life. They’ll think you died here.”

Niedern licked his lips, eyes shifting from side to side. “I’m too old for that.”

“Too bad. There are technologies out there to rejuvenate you... if you can find them and pay for them. But a guy like you... no, you’ll go back and try to suck from the teat of the power structure.”

“Maybe I won’t.”

“Prove me wrong, then.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“You’ll have plenty of time for that.” Straker snapped his fingers at the Breakers who’d brought Niedern. “Put him in the brig.”

The next time Straker saw Niedern, he was being frog-marched across the boarding tube into the still empty transport number 21, along with the rest of the *Trollheim*’s crew.

Their transport’s sidespace generators were disabled and their fusion engines were still out of commission. Two more transports were prepped for the captured prisoners of war, leaving eighteen to escape with. For those captured and released, it was going to be a long trip back to Culloden-2 on impellers alone—weeks living on rations and recycled water. That would give the Breakers plenty of time to escape.

Now that the danger was past and all communication with the wider Republic had been cut off, the Breakers fleet took a few days to make repairs, reorganize, and refuel before entering sidespace.

Zaxby and his flotilla of sixteen skimmers remained with the Breakers as well—joined them formally, in fact.

“I’ve had enough of being the Grand Marshal of Ruxin,” Zaxby said when asked about it during a visit to the *Independence*. The skimmers were parked inside the flagship’s egg-shaped main section during the transit, though most of the Ruxins stayed aboard their own ships, preferring a wet environment rather than wear water suits in the dry human air.

Loco had smirked in reply to Zaxby. “More likely Ruxin’s had enough of you.”

“I do admit to encountering stiff political opposition. It is surprisingly difficult to get special interest groups to see reason, and Vuxana is not

always supportive. And, they call me a human-lover behind my back, despite all I've done for Ruxin. Ingrates."

"I didn't realize you had a back to talk behind."

"A figure of speech—but further evidence that I'm tainted, I suppose."

Loco waggled his eyebrows. "And a human-lover, you said. More tentacle porn?"

"No comment. Have you never experimented with an alien species?"

"Ew."

"You're not nearly as libertine as you profess, Johnny Paloco."

"You figured me out. It's an image thing—like yours. Only you can't seem to keep yours intact."

"It's less about image than politics, which is a female realm. Males and neuters intrude at their peril. I found myself spending more and more time supervising and instructing my children. They are also vexing."

"Okay, so... what you're really saying is, you're sick of the old ball and chain and the rugrats and you're running off to join the circus again."

"My recall of human metaphors may be rusty, yet I am certain you mangled those thoroughly, Johnny Paloco. Still, I believe you've put your subtentacle on it. After five years, I need a change. A return to the freedom of adventure and the great unknown!"

Loco snapped his fingers. "Vuxana threw you out, didn't she?"

"Not as such, but she did suggest I find fulfillment elsewhere in order not to intrude on her interest in her new lover. Lovers, truth to be told."

"Yeah, she threw you out all right." Loco awkwardly patted what passed for Zaxby's shoulder. "Sorry, buddy, but there are other fish in the sea."

"I have no desire to mate with fish. They smell like—"

"—yeah, me neither. Good thing we have hundreds of Ruxins in the Breakers."

"My crews add a few hundred more to that tally. But we have no females, unless some neuters genderize. Perhaps I should revert to being a neuter. Eventually, I'd like to try becoming female."

Loco shuddered. "That's just... wrong."

"Not wrong, just different. Life as a neuter is far more emotionally stable, and becoming female might be quite interesting, sexually. Additionally, there's always the fulfillment of physically gestating offspring."

"Just... think about it, buddy, before you do anything drastic."

“Never fear, Johnny Paloco. I do more thinking before 0900 hours than you do all day.”

“Are you calling me stupid?”

“Would I do that?”

“I think you would.”

“I think you’re right.” Zaxby let out a sigh. “Let’s go get a beer.”

Loco’s eyebrows shot up. “You drink beer now?”

“I adapted a version for Ruxin consumption, made from fermented kelp flavored with sea snails. It’s become quite popular. I own several breweries now.”

“You must be rich.”

“Rich, famous, handsome... and bored. Once one has pitted his life against the enemy in battle, all else pales in comparison.”

“Except sex.”

“One can only fill so much time with sex.”

“Sounds like you’re not trying hard enough.” Loco gestured in the direction of the bar. “Let’s get a drink.”

“Don’t mind if I do.”

* * *

Straker found the two drinking in the *Independence*’s wardroom, the officers’ combination dining room and bar. On the flagship this was a relatively large space, with room for two hundred in a pinch. It stayed full of officers and their families on rotating mealtimes, given how many Breakers were aboard. Troops volunteered to serve as bartenders and wait-staff. Given that much of the dirty work was done by robots wirelessly operated by Indy, it was easy duty during the long, boring days of sidespace travel.

“Hey, boss,” Loco said. “Give us a *hand* here?”

“I gotta *hand* it to you, that was funny.” Straker punched Loco in the shoulder with his left fist. A metal fitting covered his right stump, protecting the hand regenerating there.

“Ow. Careful now. If it comes to *hand-to-hand*, I bet I could take you *handily*.”

“You and your *hand-me-down* jokes.”

“I try to be *evenhanded* with them.”

“Keeps your *hand* in.”

“Okay, I surrender.” Loco chuckled. “Now that we’re all in transit, you gonna tell us where we’re going?”

Straker called for a Sachsen brew as he parked himself at the bar. “Where’s the fun in that?”

“It would be nice to prepare,” Loco said. “We *are* supposed to be a military organization.”

The grizzled senior sergeant tending bar set an icy stein of beer in front of Straker and began wiping down the wood-grained surface nearby. Straker didn’t send him away. One of the perks of working the wardroom was getting to listen in on officer conversations and passing the scuttlebutt around.

After draining half the stein, Straker replied, “I think we’re more of an armed nomad caravan now.” He waved at the busy room. “Just look at all these people. Children on the flagship. Families!”

“And they’re happy,” Loco said.

“Can’t figure out why. We may have won our battle, but we still had to leave our home. And there are more battles to come.”

“It’s like I said. We *are* a military organization, Derek. It may not be cool to say out loud, but career warriors need some war now and then or they feel useless. In fact, Zaxby was just saying how bored he was without a fight.”

Zaxby lifted his smelly sea-beer. “*It is well that war is so terrible, else we would grow fond of it.* So said General Robert E. Lee.”

“You’ve been reading human history?” Straker asked.

“As we Ruxins are doomed to be an alien minority among humans, I thought it wise to learn all I could. Unfortunately, few humans read Ruxin history.”

Loco wagged his eyebrows, mocking. “Ruxins got history?”

Zaxby rolled all four eyes in return. “You see what I must deal with.” He sniffed. “Philistines.”

“Back to our destination...” Loco said.

Straker drummed his fingers. “We’re heading for Crossroads. From there, we’ll figure it out.”

“Crossroads?” Loco asked.

Zaxby replied, “An aptly named star system beyond the far side of what humans term the frontier. Of course, it is only a frontier to humans. To the

many other races of the galaxy, it is merely an extensive area of space unclaimed by any empire, usually called the Middle Reach. Each star system is self-governing in its own manner.”

“Um, about Crossroads?” Loco said again.

“Crossroads is the literal translation of the system’s name,” Zaxby continued. “It’s well placed as a stopover along the natural trade routes among more than thirty separate regimes, and free traders from hundreds more visit. It’s governed by the Conglomerate, a group of what you would call corporations, whose main concern is keeping order, doing business, and extracting fees for use of its facilities.”

“Fees...” Straker mused. “What do they use for money?”

“Various forms of credit, much as all civilized species do,” Zaxby said. “Conglomerate credit has become the primary currency in the Middle Reach. The real question is, what will we trade to them to obtain credits?”

“Well, we don’t have a lot of goods to trade, so that leaves services.”

“Military services, you mean,” Loco said.

“Yes. It’s what we’re good at.” Straker looked bleak. “It means trading lives for credits, at least until we put down some kind of roots and establish a new homeworld. After that, we can branch out.”

“You know boss, I’m fine with fighting for pay, but how do you feel about it?”

Straker finished off his beer and called for another. “Ambivalent. Conflicted. But it’s been five years since we saved humanity from the Crystals and the Opters. Those five years have been the most stable since I left home for Academy. I’m past thirty now. I’m directly responsible for forty thousand people, including my own family. I don’t have the luxury of being high-minded anymore.”

“Well, well, well,” Loco said. “A new Straker emerges—leaving the hero complex behind.”

Straker got a far-off look in his eyes. “For now. We’ll come back someday and set things right.”

Chapter 7

Admiral Engels, aboard *Independence*, in transit to Crossroads.

By the fourth week in sidespace, with three more to go, everyone was suffering from a certain level of cabin fever. A brisk work schedule and plenty of entertainments helped, but Engels found herself longing for the seas and rocky cliffs of Culloden, and its deep green forests filled with a blend of native and introduced animals.

Five years planetside and I'm spoiled, she thought. For fifteen years, from Academy onward, I spent my life in ships and hardly thought about it. Now, even our giant quarters aboard this flagship seems cramped.

Of course, adding in two children of age five and six made things more interesting and even more crowded. Having a robot nanny run by Indy helped a lot. How did other mothers do it? She felt guilty even though she knew her position and workload justified the privilege.

That was another thing that pissed her off. Culloden's economy had just begun to hit its stride. Legitimate wealth based on hard work had been just around the corner. Then that asshole Steel and his Blueshirts had messed everything up. Now, she had forty thousand cranky people crowded aboard ships, all needing food, oxygen, waste processing, maintenance.

Adding to the pressure, the warships they'd captured had all been damaged by the fighting. They were short of parts and materials, and had already cannibalized some of the transports in order to make sure the warships were combat-capable.

When they arrived, what would the fleet look like? Would all the ships even arrive? Each vessel was on its own in that strange dimension, except those docked together. Crews and resources had been reallocated before departure, but during the trip each crew would have to perform its own repairs.

And at Crossroads, what would they have left to pay for what they needed? The Breakers had modest reserves of rare minerals, drugs, chemicals, spices—but she had no idea what would be valuable. She and everyone else combed the databases for answers, but information was spotty, uncertain at best.

The one thing they did know was that Crossroads Conglomerate credit was the gold standard across the Middle Reach. Everyone took it, everyone

wanted it, and it was the most secure currency available, theoretically impossible to counterfeit or replicate due to its subquantum blockchain composition.

The question remained: how to earn it?

* * *

When they arrived at the Crossroads system, the Breakers fleet—one flagship, six human warships, sixteen skimmers and eighteen transports—remained in flatspace, well beyond the edge of the star’s significant gravity influence. As soon as they’d transited in, automated beacons had warned them against entering curved space without proper clearance.

What Crossroads could do against an armed fleet Engels wasn’t sure, but she was in uncharted territory now, operating from sketchy information collected from many sources. The last known Republic scout ship to spend seven weeks in sidespace in order to visit Crossroads had done so six years ago, and had not been allowed to approach the inner system. “No belligerents” was Crossroads’ advertised rule, and the definition of “belligerent” was obviously up to the Conglomerate.

She ordered Commander Sinden and her team to present a quick overview of the situation, along with potential courses of action, using the information flooding into the fleet’s sensors.

The problem wasn’t lack of info—it was information overload. Indy had detected more than one million vessels in the system, ranging from tiny craft that must be either robotic or occupied by beings much smaller than humans, to local ships well beyond the sidespace mass limit. There were also millions of asteroids and comets, many of which had facilities attached to or built on them.

Crossroads lived up to its name. It was the busiest place she’d ever seen.

“Show us Crossroads proper,” Engels said after Sinden had presented her initial summary. The gigantic trading post appeared in the hologram above the conference table, a lumpy sphere of construction five hundred kilometers in diameter, hinting at its origins as a moon or planetoid.

“Big,” Straker said. “Biggest manufactured object I’ve ever seen, anyway.”

“It’s quite large for a station,” Sinden replied. “More than one thousand years ago, it was established on one of the moons of Crossroads-4, a gas

giant.” Sinden smoothly manipulated the display to show a diagram of the system, illustrating her narration as if she were teaching a class. “About ninety years later the owners, the Fugjios Conglomerate, broke the moon free from planetary orbit. Over several years’ time, they moved it into a stellar orbit much nearer its sun.”

“Why?” Loco said.

“Three reasons, it appears. One, the conglomerate was embroiled in a political dispute with the system’s legal government, which originated on Crossroads-2, a life-bearing world inhabited by a saurian race called the Kell. The Kell claimed jurisdiction over all existing planets and moons in their home system—but not maneuverable stations. Due to that loophole in their legal claim, the Conglomerate was able to evade Kell authority by declaring the moon a movable station—by moving it and becoming a new, independent nation.”

“You said three reasons?” Engels asked. “What are the other two?”

“Security and cheap power. By moving the station closer to the star, travel time from flatspace was lengthened, giving the Conglomerate a good long look at everyone coming to trade. And, with cheap, plentiful solar power, Crossroads need no longer rely on hydrogen isotopes collected from the gas giant claimed by the Kell.”

“Makes sense,” Engels acknowledged.

The display zoomed back in on Crossroads, in a stellar orbit exactly opposite the Kell planet. “Over the next nine hundred years, the Kell’s power waned as the Conglomerate’s grew. Crossroads was transformed into a vast commercial spaceport by processing the substance of the planetoid into structural materials. In terms of sheer size and economic activity, it’s more than fifteen times as large as any other known trading center.”

“Bigger than Atlantis?” Engels asked incredulously. She’d seen the hundreds of habitats and thousands of satellites orbiting the Republic’s most prosperous planet, backed up by a population of over twenty billion.

“Much larger, in terms of trade and credit flows. It is, in effect, a floating city five hundred kilometers square—and five hundred kilometers deep. Every centimeter of Crossroads is used for trade—materials, services, deal-making, banking, anything you can think of. It’s also jealously neutral in any disputes among the hundreds of alien races and regimes, so it’s a diplomatic center as well. The Conglomerate is strict and bureaucratic but extremely fair. In fact, it’s the system’s government in all but name.”

“Hmm,” Straker said. “A government based on nothing but money. Seems like it would be thoroughly corrupt.”

“Quite the opposite,” Sinden replied. “Its very wealth provides prosperity for all who have money or want to work for it.”

“And for those who don’t?” Loco asked.

“Like you?” Zaxby interjected.

Loco pointed an accusing finger. “Nice one, buddy. You just wait.”

“In answer to your question,” Sinden said with ice in her voice, “it’s against the Regulations—their law—to be indigent. All punishments are based on fining the offender and making restitution to the victims.”

“All punishments? So you commit a crime and just... pay everyone off?” Straker said, clearly appalled.

“In theory. However, some fines carry mandatory caveats, such as work in unpleasant conditions, temporary slave-links, or expulsion from Crossroads space. For the law-abiding, with clear legal paths to satisfy ambition, plus swift and relatively impartial enforcement of law, most corruption is minimized. It’s not a perfect system, and many freedoms are curtailed, but it has functioned admirably for more than a millennium.”

“Freedoms are curtailed?” Loco asked. “What freedoms?”

“Mostly freedom of speech. There are strict codes about any communication or action that harms legitimate business. In other areas, the laws are quite loose. Most drugs and personal activities are legal, if often regulated or zoned.” Sinden rapped the table with a knuckle to emphasize her point. “One key takeaway is this: in Conglomerate regulations, there is no moral weight or public record. If you commit a crime, and then fulfill all imposed obligations—fines, restitution, mandatory conditions—your public legal record is expunged. As far as the Fugjios Conglomerate is concerned, you never did anything wrong. Everything is business, just business.”

“Weird, but straightforward,” Straker said. “Indy, work with our JAG section to study up on all this legal stuff. We need to stay out of legal trouble if we’re going to do business here.”

“And what is our business?” Zaxby asked.

“We’re looking for a fight.” Straker grinned. “A mercenary commission, that is.”

“Mercenaries are legal?” Loco wondered.

“Remember, there’s no interstellar government in the Middle Reach,” Engels said. “Nobody can stop a fighting force from hiring itself out. The

trick will be to only get involved in disputes where both sides will respect the usual laws of war—surrenders, taking and exchanging prisoners, avoiding targeting noncombatants—things like that.” She gave Straker a pointed look. “We don’t want to get into any more fights to the death where the Breakers take severe casualties. That’s all behind us now, right?”

“Yes, Carla,” Straker said mildly, stroking his jawline. “We’ve all discussed this thoroughly over the last seven weeks. Our forces—our people—are our stock in trade. We’ll conserve them.”

“The families will be happy to hear that,” Engels said with only a touch of sarcasm.

“But we can’t be scared of a fight,” he added.

“That’s not what I’m concerned about. I’m concerned about all the little Johnnies and Katies and Carlas and Dereks who might lose parents. Before, we were working for the people and the government. Now, we *are* the people and the government—our own government. It’s just us. The Breakers. A family. Every time we go into battle, it’s a family fight.”

Straker sighed. “You’ve said all this a dozen times. I got it.”

Engels lapsed into silence, realizing Derek was right. She’d belabored her arguments. No point in pushing it further. Motherhood really had changed her, despite her desire to remain a combat commander. Why was it mothers changed more than fathers? No doubt because children were made from the bodies of women, not men. A father would love his children, but to a mother, they were literally part of herself, a connection felt deep in her bones. It made her cautious and conservative.

Maybe that was why biology let fathers maintain some distance. Too much caution, and necessary risks would never be taken. Too much risk, and the offspring died to no purpose.

Not for the first time Engels wondered if the Ruxins had a better system—propagate dozens or hundreds of spawn and let the strongest survive. They only invested emotion in their children once the little octopoids learned to talk. Before that, they might have been domestic animals for all the care they took of them.

“Awkward,” Loco singsonged, bringing Engels’ attention back to the briefing.

“So what you’re saying, Nancy,” Straker said, “is that inside Crossroads space, there’s law and order, but out here in flatspace it’s the Wild West.”

“There is no west in space, Derek Straker,” Zaxby said.

“It’s a metaphor, Zaxby. Look it up.”

“I shall.” He touched the aug implanted where his head joined the rest of his body, activating it. “I see. From Old Earth, a reference to the North American continent’s highly unstable western region during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. More generally, an area lacking central government and often characterized by violence, populated with a wide variety of individuals and groups, each with its own disparate goals.”

Straker nodded. “That works. The point is, we’re on our own.”

* * *

Hours later, with the fleet drawn in around the flagship in order to let grabships and shuttles flit from ship to ship making repairs and transferring supplies, Indy requested Engels report to the bridge, along with the rest of the available command staff.

“Something important?” Engels said as she strode onto the bridge and took the flag chair. She saw all stations were manned, including the assistants—a double watch.

“I believe so,” Indy said.

“Well, what is it?”

“Please allow me a moment’s delay, until the other key staff members are here.”

Engels crossed her arms and put her chin on her chest, hiding her impatience.

Apparently, she didn’t hide it well enough. Indy said, “Remember, we remain in the ‘Wild West’ until we get clearance to enter Crossroads space.”

“What will that take?”

“A complex series of processes, since we are unknown to the Conglomerate.”

“How long?”

“Days at least, perhaps weeks.”

Engels scowled. “So for now, we’re on our own here in deep space, with no law and no resupply. Suddenly, I’m damned glad we captured these warships.”

“Me too,” Loco said as he sauntered in, followed by Straker, Heiser, Zaxby and Mara.

“Me three,” Zaxby said. “Although my skimmers are not to be discounted.”

“We’re not forgetting them,” Straker said. “What’s this all about?” He flexed his right hand, a habit since it regrew. He often said it didn’t feel quite right yet.

The holotank flickered to life, showing the area of space around the Breaker fleet. “Several groups of ships and many individual vessels are approaching our position,” Indy replied. “Given our lack of knowledge about the capabilities of most of the species and regimes out here, I thought it prudent to raise the alert level of the fleet, assume a defensive posture, and call for key personnel.”

“Why are they approaching?” Engels asked. “Have they hailed us?”

“I have received over one hundred separate hails. Of those I was able to translate, or which switched to Earthan after I broadcast our preferred language. Most were offers to engage in unethical or highly questionable activities, so I rejected them outright and warned the ships specified to stand off.”

“Activities like what?” Loco said.

“Sentient trafficking topped the list, followed by trade in detrimental recreational pharmaceuticals.”

“Slavery and drugs?” Straker growled. “Tell them no to the first, and ‘maybe later’ to the second.”

“Maybe later?” Engels yelped. “You’re considering the drug trade?”

“Not the way you mean,” Mara interrupted, glancing at her brother with a nod. “I think Derek means we should get samples and test them for their medical effects. There might be something we could use ourselves. I’m still trying to reverse the Hok parasite and restore people to their original state, and there are always uses for new medicines.”

“I feel like the slope is getting slippery,” Engels said.

Loco grinned. “More fun as we slide.”

Straker raised his voice. “Everybody calm down. We’re not going to suddenly turn into criminals here.”

“If there is no law, there is no crime,” Zaxby said.

“There’s Breaker law,” Straker replied. “Guess that’s something to codify—later. So who’s still approaching?”

Indy replied, “There are three distinct squadrons of three to eight ships, each of whom has indicated they are not involved in trafficking of sentients

or pharmaceuticals. There are also nine separate individual vessels, of which five I have not been able to establish any intelligible communication. Those may simply be curious, gathering information. Of the four remaining, one is approaching at the limits of its acceleration, pursued by another of the unknowns. Ah, interesting—the unknown has begun firing at the one heading in our direction.”

Zaxby ran his subtentacles over the console. “The fleeing ship is attempting to vidlink, using Earthan standard coding.”

“I was getting to that,” Indy said tartly. “Admiral Engels?”

“Go ahead, let’s see the vidlink.”

The cockpit of a ship appeared. The movements of the vid pickup indicated the ship’s gravplating was struggling to keep the G forces under control as the vessel maneuvered wildly. On the screen, a human woman with long purple hair energetically worked the controls.

“Thank God you answered,” the woman said. “I can’t keep this up much longer. You mind getting these assholes off my back?”

Engels glanced at the holotank and snapped, “Comms, pass the word for Captain Gray to fire a shot across the bow of the pursuers and move to intercept.”

“Aye aye, ma’am.”

“I’ll send some drones along,” Indy said. “We don’t know all the capabilities of what we’re facing, even if the unknown vessel is small.”

“Or either vessel,” Engels murmured to herself. She wasn’t assuming this lone human was friendly or trustworthy just because she needed help.

Gray’s cruiser *Samarah* fired a secondary laser at long range, its beam passing between the pursued and the pursuer. Space dust and ionized gas sparkled with the energy. There was no missing the message.

The chasing ship broke off, turning away at full acceleration, but not before launching a small, high-speed missile which arrowed for its quarry.

“Shit, shit, shit!” the woman on the screen shrieked. “Goddammit!”

The holotank zoomed in on the missile rapidly catching up to the woman’s sleek craft. Just before it impacted, a beam from the *Samarah* took it out.

“Thanks,” the woman said. “Permission to come aboard?”

“Granted,” Engels said after glancing at Straker for objection. “Use Flight Deck One. Indy will pass you instructions. By the way—” Her

further words were cut off as the vidlink dropped. “Oh, well. I guess we’ll make introductions in person.”

“After a medical scan and quarantine if necessary,” Mara said.

Straker turned to his sister. “We’ve never needed quarantine before.”

“We’ve never been outside human space before. They might have unknown diseases out here. Patience and care now might save a lot of trouble later.”

“Agreed,” Engels said. “Doctor Straker, go set it up. Let me know when she’s cleared.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Mara hurried off the bridge.

“What about—” Straker began.

Engels cut him off. “We’ll need security when she comes in. General Straker, will you handle that please?”

Straker spoke without turning, eyes locked with Engels. “Loco.”

“On it, boss.” Loco strode off the bridge.

“Admiral Engels, you mind joining me in the ready room?” Straker stalked over to the door and opened it.

“Indy,” Engels said, “How long until those other ships and groups approach?”

“The nearest is fifty minutes away.”

“You know where I’ll be.”

When the door shut, Straker snapped, “What was that in there?”

“Apparently that was me bruising your ego.”

“Or you undercutting my command.”

Engels locked her hands behind her back and braced her shoulders.

“Am I still your fleet commander?”

“Yeah.”

“Then you should have no problems with me handling fleet details in the midst of operations.”

“This is more than a fleet detail. It’s contact with new species.”

“Not true. She was obviously human, speaking Earthan. Since when are you a micro-manager, afraid your subordinates will make you look bad just doing their fucking jobs?”

That stopped him. He put his fist to his mouth and coughed self-consciously. “You think so?”

“I think you’ve been bored and itching for action after five years, and now you’re like a kid at an amusement park, over-eager to ride every ride.”

“Okay. Point taken.”

“And by the way...” Engels stopped herself.

“What?”

“Nothing.” Now wasn’t the time to bring up further issues of command, though she’d been thinking about them for the past seven weeks. Not with mere minutes before they might be interacting—maybe fighting—with several new aliens.

Straker seemed to come to the same conclusion. “Okay.” He stepped forward to wrap her in his arms. “Whatever it is, let’s mommy and daddy present a united front. Otherwise, the kids lose confidence, right?”

She laid her head on his chest for a moment. “Right.” She kissed him, and then said, “Let me go, you gorilla.”

He squeezed gently once more, and then released her.

In her flag chair once more, Engels checked the holotank. Her fleet was set up in the best formation possible to meet the nearest of the three approaching squadrons. The cruisers were spread in a triangle forward, with the dreadnoughts back and in the center. Behind each DN, a line of six transports hid like soldiers sharing one tree.

Zaxby’s skimmers occupied a ring farther out and ahead, acting as low-observable skirmishers. Like every escort-sized ship in history, they were picketed dangerously forward to give warning of an enemy trick.

The closest alien squadron consisted of five cruiser-sized vessels, now entering long range for Breaker weaponry. Engels realized she had no idea of what capabilities she faced. “Analysis of approaching ships,” she said in Commander Sinden’s direction.

A holo of a ten-legged pink spider appeared on two of the large screens as Sinden spoke. “The race on board call themselves the Arattak. This is what they look like, if their vid-hail is accurate.”

The holo switched to a ship diagram. “Their ships are teardrop-shaped, unlike our usual cylindrical design, flying with the point forward, the fat end containing the engines aft. They have one medium-power forward-facing energy weapon of as-yet unknown type and strength, as well as ten secondary energy turrets around the waist, which gives them total coverage in three dimensions.”

“Don’t trust them,” a new, female voice said from the main bridge door. “Keep them at long range or you’ll regret it.”

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Chapter 8

Admiral Engels, on the bridge of the *Independence*

Engels turned to see the tall, green-eyed, purple-haired woman from the small ship saunter onto the bridge. Her face was broad, with strong, high cheekbones offset by a wide nose, slightly crooked as if it had been broken and not set well. That one flaw aside, Engels could see her raw animal attractiveness turn several heads, a voluptuous figure poured into a form-fitting black outfit, with trousers and a stylish jacket.

She wore a harness with a dozen holsters, sheaths and pouches, several of which were now empty. Behind her, Sergeant Steiner held a stunner in one rocklike fist, pointed at the small of the woman's back. Beside him, a female marine corporal carried a utility bag in one hand, a needler in the other.

"Tell the Arattak ships to come to relative rest at long range," Engels snapped toward Comms, turning away from the newcomer. "If they don't comply, they may be fired upon." As much as she wanted this initial encounter to be peaceful, she was acutely aware of the Breakers' vulnerability.

Then she returned her attention to the woman. "I'm Carla Engels. What do we call you?"

"Captain Chiara Jilani, free trader, at your service." She bowed casually, and then strolled over to the holotank. "From Seconda Venezia."

"No reply from the Arattak ships," Comms said.

"They're not decelerating," Sensors announced.

Jilani stripped off thin, flare-wristed gloves, finger by finger, before taking them in one fist to wave at the holotank. "You'll have to fire at them, punch them in the nose. The Arattak always push the boundaries. They're predators. You have to demonstrate you are too, or they'll think of you as prey. Might as well shoot first, or you may take some damage when they do."

Engels considered. Keep the moral high ground by acting only defensively, or believe Jilani and possibly be the bad guy?

She split the difference. "Fire warning shots with beams. Soft-launch a missile spread. We'll recover them later if we need to." Until the Breakers

had a source of resupply, missiles were irreplaceable, but they were useful as a visible threat.

“Won’t work,” Jilani said. “They think warnings only make you look weak. Actions, not words—that’s all they care about.”

Engels soon saw Captain Jilani was right. The Arattak weren’t slowing down.

Straker coughed and gave Engels a hard look.

“Approaching medium range,” Indy said. “I’m launching drones.”

“Pass to the cruisers. Engage the approaching ships, beams only.”

Three volleys of beams lanced out to paint the front of three Arattak ships with deadly energy. Hemispheres sparkled and flared ahead of each alien.

“They have shields,” Straker said.

“Of course they have shields,” Jilani said. “Don’t you?”

“We do,” Engels said, gripping her chair arms. “Are they slowing down?”

“No,” Indy declared. “They’re firing.”

The three Arattak ships that had been hit fired their central weapons as they entered medium range. Spinning spheres of crackling energy leaped across space at high speed to impact the shield of the three cruisers. The balls of lightning enveloped the shields, surrounding them with blinding light.

“*DNs, engage!*” Engels barked. “Skimmers and drones, attack. Send in the shipkillers, but keep positive terminal control. Damage report on the cruisers?”

“Cruisers report no systems damage, except that the attack burned out their shield generators with feedback.”

“That was an anti-shield weapon,” Jilani said. “Their next shots will hurt.”

“Have the damaged cruisers fall back on impellers,” Engels snapped, “max frontal reinforcement. Let’s see what our DN weaponry can do.”

The heavy spinal weapons of the dreadnoughts fired particle beams from longer range. The enemy ships didn’t evade, perhaps overconfident after the cruisers failed to damage them. Three flares showed direct hits.

When the sensors cleared, the holotank displayed the Arattak squadron making an unbelievably rapid turn away, to speed off obliquely from the Breakers fleet. This time, they were evading strenuously.

“Recover the missiles and cease fire,” Engels said.

“Typical Arattak,” Jilani said. “Now that they know you’ll fight, you can deal with them—if you have to. I wouldn’t, though. They can be a huge pain in the ass.”

Commander Sinden spoke. “Captain Jilani, their final turn exceeded the limits of physics for conventional maneuvering. Do you know how they did that?”

“I’ve heard they create an anchor point in spacetime and sling themselves around it using an energy tether. And no, I don’t know the details. Every race or group jealously guards its favorite tech. In fact, one reason the Arattak are so pushy is to gather technical intel. They want to see how you fight, what tech you use.”

“What’s *your* favorite tech?” Loco said, slowly circling closer to Jilani like a dog around an unknown stray.

Jilani raised an eyebrow and her mouth twitched. “I’ve got a few tricks down my pants, but they don’t come cheap.”

“How *do* they come?”

“First, if you’re a gentleman.”

Straker saw things were quickly getting out of hand. He reminded himself Crossroads locals had a very different view of morality.

“Loco! Down, boy!” Straker said, then he turned to the woman. “Captain Jilani, I’m General Derek Straker, and you’re the guest of Straker’s Breakers. I apologize on behalf of our resident womanizer, Johannes Miguel Paloco. If he keeps it up, feel free to kick him in the nuts.”

Loco glared at Straker, annoyed at the use of his full name—as Straker expected.

Jilani grinned. “*Non importa, comandante*. I know the type. If he gets out of line... well, we’ll either have a lot of fun together, or I’ll feed him his *testicoli* for breakfast. I’d say chances are fifty-fifty.”

“I’ll take those odds,” Loco murmured as he sidled over to lean against the bulkhead with exaggerated, leering coolness.

“All right, who’s next?” Engels asked in Sinden’s direction.

“A flotilla of eight ships of various sizes ranging from cruiser to DN size, heavily armed and armored.” Sinden put up a picture of a broad-faced creature with thin fur of brown, black and white. Engels immediately thought of something bovine, if cattle stood on two legs, wore fine linen clothing, had four-fingered hands and expressive faces. “They identify

themselves as Humbar and claim to be interested in trading food and anything related—spice plants, especially.”

Jilani spoke without being asked. “They’re good people, and completely defensive. Tough in a fight, but they never start one, and all they care about is improving the terraformed worlds of their home system. They love getting new plants. You can bargain pretty hard for something completely unknown and useful, if you’re the first to offer it.”

Engels spoke to Colonel Keller at the flag logistics station. “Monika, take this one. Find some botanists or agriculturalists among our civilians, form a team, and see what we can get out of the Humbar. Oh, and include some kind of trader or business expert to help with the negotiations. Once you’re done with the Humbar, keep the trading team together on call. I get the feeling we’ll be needing them.”

“Who’s next?” Engels asked in Sinden’s direction.

“The Eprem.” The picture Sinden called forth showed a blunt-nosed hexapod with glistening skin, like a six-legged salamander centaur with webbed feet and hands. It wore only a tool belt and harness around its upper body. “Six warships of various sizes with a moderate amount of detectable weaponry and heavy armor. They’re looking for mercenaries.”

“Sounds promising,” Straker considered aloud.

Loco leaned a little closer to the girl. “Maybe later you can tell me all about it over a bottle of your favorite adult beverage? What do, um, Veneechians drink?”

“We drink wine, and we’re Italians. *Italians*.”

“I thought you said you were from Segundo Veneechia.”

“*Seconda Venezia*, Madonna and the saints preserve me.” Jilani rolled her eyes and turned back to Engels. “Why isn’t he wearing bells?”

“What?”

“Bells. You know, like a court fool? Okay, never mind. I can see we have some cultural differences to overcome.” Jilani waved as if shooing flies. “Anyway, yeah, the Eprem worship truth like a god. I’m not really sure whether this god is supposed to be an actual person or only an idea, but what matters is, lying is their ultimate sin. You lie to them and you’re damned to hell with no hope of redemption.”

Loco turned to Straker. “Right up your alley, boss. Put on your Bravo Boy costume and fight for Truth, Justice and the Hundred Worlds. Er, the

Republic. Oh, shit, we can't even use that one anymore." He mimed wiping away tears.

Jilani glanced around. "Is he like this all the time?"

Engels took a deep breath and let it out in a theatrical sigh. "He grows on you."

"Like a fungus," Zaxby added.

Straker stepped forward to command attention. "Captain Jilani, please tell us more about these Eprem. You said, 'no lying, be truthful.' Got it. What if I simply make a mistake?"

"They're not morons, General. No spacefaring race is. They know the difference between lies and mistakes. I've found the best way to deal with them is to imagine you're a witness under oath in a courtroom, in front of a judge and jury with absolutely no sense of humor. Don't joke, stick to the facts, and always honor the letter of the agreement."

Straker cocked his head. "What about its spirit?"

Jilani smiled faintly. "That's something to watch out for. They're not a bunch of devils bargaining for your souls, but it pays to read the fine print. Make sure you have a good lawyer before you sign anything."

"We may not have much choice other than to deal with them," Straker said. "Not if it's going to take weeks or months to get certified for trade by Crossroads. We've been nearly two months in space, our civilians are getting restless, and we're running low on supplies. Let's see what these Eprem want from us—and what they're willing to pay."

* * *

Two hours later, Straker watched as the Eprem delegation of six landed their shuttle on the *Independence's* primary flight deck and disembarked. They wore collars covering their gills, with mechanisms that helped them breathe in the air, and which also translated their gurgling speech into passable Earthan.

At Captain Jilani's suggestion, flight deck operations had been shut down. A conference table was set up in sight of the Eprem shuttle, along with a suite of displays which Indy controlled. Along one long side, five Eprem sat like dogs with their hindquarters on pads on the deck. The two on each side of the center creature placed small devices on the table in front of themselves—their version of handtabs, perhaps.

The sixth Eprem stood with its back to its fellow in the center, facing away from the table, as if guarding. Jilani had said this was a traditional pose, something to do with their beliefs.

Straker sat opposite, with Engels and Jilani flanking him. Zaxby and Colonel Keller rounded out the mix, and Sergeant Steiner stood in the same position as the sixth Eprem took—behind Straker, back to back.

Loco had been miffed at being left out, but Straker supported Engels' insistence Loco was the wrong guy for this kind of initial negotiation, and had ordered him to make the rounds of the troops. One smartass remark might screw everything up.

After Straker introduced himself alone—according to local custom, each side would address the other through only one negotiator—his opposite number spoke.

"I am Commodore Wardel, commanding our flotilla. I am pleased to make your acquaintance, and would like to conduct trade. Is this agreeable?"

"It is." Straker had resolved to keep everything he said simple, straightforward and truthful, no matter what.

"I understand you offer military services. Is this correct?"

"It is."

"We are in the market for military services."

"Excellent."

"What are your capabilities?"

Straker turned his head to the side to indicate he wasn't speaking to Wardel. "Indy."

Simplified graphics appeared on the screens nearby, and the Eprem's heads moved slightly as they adjusted, but not as much as humans would have. Apparently, though the Eprem had binocular vision, they were perfectly comfortable using only one of their widely spaced eyes to look at a screen—or perhaps they could look at two screens, one with each eye, and still comprehend.

"We have the seven warships you see, as well as transports," Straker said. "We also have approximately six thousand ground troops available for hire, with another fourteen thousand in reserve if needed. They're equipped with the numbers and types of military vehicles and weaponry you see here." He gestured at the holoscreens.

Wardel examined the screens for long moments while his fellows waved six-fingered hands over their machines, evidently inputting data. Straker had no problem with that. As long as they didn't try to hack into Breaker systems, the Eprem could have all the information they could gather.

Straker's counterpart then conferred with the other Eprem, in their own language. Indy would be listening with directional microphones, ready to translate and warn Straker of anything he needed to know.

"Your mercenary force is acceptable to our preliminary assessment. It is optimized for dry land and atmospheric operations?"

"Yes." Straker pondered. "As opposed to what?"

"As opposed to amphibious or aquatic operations. I see you have an aquatic, nonhuman associate with you." Wardel indicated Zaxby, sitting in his water suit, subtentacles patiently interlaced. "What is its role?"

"This is Zaxby, a Ruxin. Ruxins are allies who have chosen to join my military organization."

"It is under your command?"

"He is."

"We must be clear, General Straker. If we contract for your services, you are responsible for everyone under your command, and for fulfilling the contract. We are looking for a dry-land force to conduct military operations against a dry-land enemy, an enemy we as a primarily aquatic species find difficult to attack. In contrast, we do not need, nor do we wish to see deployed, aquatic forces, whether human or Ruxin. Any such deployment would constitute a potential threat to our control of the aquatic environment of the world in question."

"You're worried the Ruxins would want your territory?"

"Our territory is highly desirable."

Straker folded his hands. "But it's you that are attacking your dry-land enemies? Why?"

Wardel's eyes flickered as nictitating membranes blinked. "Do you need a reason beyond compensation in order to fight on our behalf?"

"No, but I need to be sure I have no reason *not* to fight on your behalf. I'm not going to do something against my own principles. What's this fight about?"

"I find it odd that a mercenary force would be concerned about the background of our quarrel..."

"I want to make sure our moral beliefs aren't violated in doing so."

“You have religious beliefs?”

Straker wondered about the accuracy of the translation, because it was being provided by the Eprem machines. He couldn't assume every nuance was correct. He'd have to tread carefully here, at least until he learned more about these people and how they thought. “Individuals among us hold various religious beliefs, or none at all. The Breakers as an organization have a moral and ethical philosophy rather than a religious belief system. We won't sign a contract or join a fight that violates our philosophy. If this doesn't make sense to you, we may need to work on improving our mutual ability to clearly communicate subtle concepts.”

The Eprem discussed this pronouncement for almost five minutes while Straker waited patiently. They probably believed their words in their own language were private, but they weren't, as Indy was recording everything and was already making progress on a complete translation database.

Straker could've held his own discussion with his staff, but for the same reason, he didn't want to give anything away by speaking in front of the Eprem.

Wardel eventually spoke. “We understand. Your ways are different from ours. It is necessary for us to work with atheists and those of unsettled beliefs. I myself have dealt with many species and so have a broader view than most of my people, but you must understand. The common, ordinary Eprens might be quite distressed to hear there are atheists among you. They might equate atheism with lying, which you probably know is the greatest sin. I suggest that this deficiency in your character not be mentioned in future interactions between the Breakers and the Eprem.”

Engels whispered in Straker's ear, and he repeated her concern to Wardel. “You do understand humans aren't as monolithic and unified as the Eprem, right? I speak only for the Breakers. What other humans do or say does not reflect on us, or vice-versa. If other humans lie, I'm not responsible.”

“We comprehend. Most species, unlike the virtuous Epren, squabble amongst themselves. We understand this. This difference is one of the ways our culture is superior to others. We regret any offense in stating this viewpoint, but it is the truth.”

Straker didn't bother to argue. At least these people were honest in their arrogance. “Fine. Back to who and why you're fighting. Please explain.”

Wardel gestured to one of his team, and a hologram appeared above the table, projected from one of the portable machines. It showed a creature with thick, rhinoceros-like skin folded into overlapping flexible plates. It had six limbs like the Eprem, and also walked like a centaur, with four legs on the ground and two arms with hands up in front. Its face was wide and forward-facing like a rhino, though with no horn, and large upstanding ears that made Straker think of a donkey.

“This is our enemy, the Teprem.”

“Eprems and Teprems. That’ll get confusing,” Straker said. “Let’s call these guys Rhinos, and we’ll call you Salamanders, if you don’t mind. No offense meant.”

“None taken. We will adjust our translators.” Wardel paused while one of his assistants manipulated a device. “Adjustment completed.”

“Go on.”

“The Rhinos are dry-land dwelling. We shared our world without difficulty with them from pre-history onward, until approximately sixty years ago. About that time the Rhinos developed a life-lengthening genetic technique, delivered by a retrovirus.”

“A biological technology; a biotech, in other words?” Straker offered.

Wardel blinked one eye, then the other. “Yes. Under political pressure from their idiotic lower classes, they recklessly provided it to their population before it was thoroughly tested. It had unintended side effects, including radically increased fertility, sex drive, and extreme aggression in their males. These characteristics were permanent, and passed on to offspring. In two generations, their population increased more than twelve-fold.”

“Can’t they reverse the genetic change?”

“They might, but they won’t. The change itself makes them more aggressive and unwilling to see reason—a closed circle of cause and effect.”

Straker nodded, seeing the implications. “And they started intruding on your living space.”

“Yes. Once, we shared the coastal wetlands in peace. We need those wetlands for breeding. Our young are amphibious before they mature and become fully aquatic. Since the introduction of their biotech, the Rhinos have drained many wetlands and are using them to grow crops for cheap food. We were forced to build artificial wetlands on far islands at great

expense to raise young safely, but this is insufficient even to maintain our population at a stable level. Even worse, a new leader has arisen among the Rhinos, one who has vowed to kill us all. He claims we are the aggressors because we want our wetlands back. He's ordered the development of chemical weapons to poison the oceans and do away with us once and for all." Wardel's face seemed to plead, even as his translated voice remained even. "We beg you, help us win this war—or at least to end it."

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Chapter 9

Straker aboard *Independence*, in flatspace, edge of the Crossroads system

Straker drummed his fingers on the conference table as he thought over the Salamander negotiator Wardel's plea to help win their war against the Rhinos—or perhaps he should say the Rhinos' war against them.

It seemed like the same old story—some strongman—strong-rhino?—encroaching on the possessions of others, taking and taking until the victim was pushed into defending themselves—and then, claiming the victim was the aggressor. What was that technique called? Passive-aggressive? Yeah, that was it. Provoke someone with an ever-rising number of small violations until they fought back, then blame the victim.

He gave Engels, Jilani, Zaxby and Keller each a chance to provide input, and he scribbled down their concerns with a stylus on his old, battered handtab before speaking—but in his heart of hearts, he'd already decided to help... assuming everything was as it seemed.

"What about nuclear weapons? Does either side have them?"

Wardel seemed to shudder. "Yes. They have many—hundreds, we believe. We have fewer than fifty, only for defensive purposes—to stop them from using theirs, we hope."

"Mutually assured destruction, my ancestors called it."

"Quite. Until recently, we lived in peace. Now that the Rhinos are contemplating genocide, they rightly believe Salamander-specific poison serves them better. A nuclear exchange will hurt their cities worse than our aquatic populations."

"We could threaten them with our own nuclear weapons—or simple gravity bombardment. Drop a few asteroids on their cities." Straker ignored Engels's fingernails digging into his arm. He wasn't seriously contemplating wholesale attacks on civilian creatures he didn't even know, but he wanted to see how the Salamanders would react.

"You would do this?"

Straker almost answered affirmatively, until Jilani kicked him under the table and glared. Belatedly, he recognized the trap—it would be a lie to confirm he would, which might torpedo the negotiations as soon as the

Salamanders discovered it. Or, it would force him to follow through, if viewed as a promise.

So, he chose his words carefully. “We might threaten. We might strike military targets... but no, I can’t envision a scenario where we’d wipe out whole cities. I imagine if that were your intent, you could use your own ships to do it yourself. Unless the Rhinos have driven you out of planetary space?”

Wardel seemed to relax. “Your guess is correct. These six ships of ours are the only military force we have in space. Our trading vessels have scattered. The Rhinos seized all orbital facilities and hold the skies above our world, and are building more warships. We must purchase help, or our race is doomed. Our remnant would wander space without a home.”

“We know how you feel,” Engels said to Wardel suddenly.

Wardel turned his head like a turret to stare at Engels. “Your aide breaks protocol. Does she speak for you, General Straker?”

“She’s my mate and my second-in-command, so her words carry weight... but I’m in charge. Is that clear enough?”

“It is. However, her statement sounds very close to a lie, and this we cannot abide.”

Engels opened her mouth to protest when Jilani leaned back and hissed at her across Straker’s back. “You can’t possibly know how another race feels, so technically, that’s a lie. Alien minds are weird. Think before you speak!”

Engels nodded and sat back, silent and brooding.

“So we’ll have to fight our way in and seize orbital space,” Straker said. “Is our force enough?”

“We assess our combined forces have about a ninety percent advantage in combat power. We also assume you have unknown proprietary technology which is likely to increase that advantage. Do you?”

Straker tried to see the Breakers from the Salamanders’ point of view. What tech would the aliens not have detected? “I believe we have more capability than you know,” he replied after a moment. He was starting to get the hang of this not-lying thing. Qualify everything like a lawyer, and always have an out.

“So,” he continued, “We seize orbital space. Then what? How can one brigade of ground troops, or even a division, help win your war? The

conflict must be huge at this point, involving at least one whole continent on your world, and populations of billions, right?”

“Billions? No. Salamanders number about 100 million. Until recently, the Rhinos numbered fewer than that. Now, however, they have grown to over 900 million. According to our projections, within twenty years they will likely number seven billion. Within a generation after that, they will overrun our small planet and either fall into savagery or spread outward to other worlds, carrying their aggression with them.”

Straker flexed his regenerated hand. It still looked younger than the other, lacking the scars of experience. “You haven’t really answered my question. We can probably take the orbital high ground for you, but what then? Other than bombing the Rhinos back the stone age, how can we fight almost a billion enemies? If even one percent of them are military, we’re facing nine million troops. Do you have enough soldiers to fight that many?”

Wardel seemed to consider before answering. “Holding orbital space will be a victory in itself. Afterward, we don’t expect you to win the war on your own, but you are dry-land creatures. You can operate where we cannot. We have certain specific missions for you to undertake, and we’re willing to negotiate payment accordingly.”

“What we really need is—”

Jilani kicked Straker lightly under the table again, causing him to pause.

She leaned over to whisper in his ear. “Don’t negotiate the terms yet, or you end up promising something you don’t intend. This is just an initial session. Tell him you agree in principle to provide military services, subject to the specifics to be negotiated over the next few days. Tell him nothing is binding until it’s in writing and signed by both parties.”

Straker repeated these conditions aloud, and Wardel agreed. “We will retire to our shuttle for two hours for prayer and discussion, and to rest. Your dry environment is stressful to us. During this time, we will open a datalink port and exchange detailed information, if you are agreeable. We will then return to the table for further negotiations.”

“Sounds good,” Straker said, standing. “Until then.”

The back-facing sixth Salamander walked toward the shuttle, and the other five turned to follow him—or her, or it?—through the portal.

With the aliens safely back inside their shuttle, the humans let out a common sigh of relief.

“Devil take it, that’s annoying,” Colonel Keller said, shaking her head in irritation. “I’m not cut out for diplomacy if it means we just sit here and say nothing. I’ve got a hundred questions, each of which has bearing on our upcoming decisions. What kind of fuel is available at their homeworld? What other planets are in their system? Is their food supply compatible with our biology? Is—”

“We’ve all got a lot of questions. We’ll discuss them in the flag conference room, not here where they might be able to listen. Indy, round up my key personnel.”

Once gathered in the conference room and provided with food and drink, Indy summarized the negotiations so far, and the proposal. She included graphics on the Salamanders’ homeworld, its geography, the enemy, and the potential missions. “The Salamanders provided an extensive database download,” she told them. “I’ve already pushed it to all ships and networks and told the appropriate people to study it.”

When the briefing ended, Straker stood and paced as he spoke. “Colonel Keller, how much longer can we survive without resupply?”

“Comfortably, about a month. Two months if we use up all our battle rations. Water and oxygen’s no problem—there are plenty of comets out here to harvest, and we can synthesize some basic carbohydrates and proteins to supplement, but we don’t have enough reprocessing capacity to create the other nutrients people need. Fuel... if we don’t go anywhere, two or three months. Less if we travel far in sidespace.”

“The civilians are already restless,” Engels said. “They’ll go stir-crazy if they don’t get off the ships soon. We need a planet or a hab.”

“That should be part of our payment,” Loco said from where he slouched at the back of the room. “Someplace where we can build a decent base.”

Straker pointed at him. “Right. But, we haven’t decided to take this contract. We could wait around another month for other offers while we get certified by Crossroads. Once we do, we’ll have access to their information network where millions of jobs and contracts are advertised, but that could take weeks or more. So do we take this one or wait?”

Heiser cleared his throat. “You’re asking us, sir?”

“I’m asking for input, not a vote... but yes, I’m asking. Show of hands: who wants to move forward on this contract?”

Most of those present raised their hands—or tentacles.

“Who wants to wait?”

Only a few showed their hands.

“Anyone want to say anything?”

Nobody spoke until Heiser did, after exchanging nods with Chief Gurung, his naval counterpart. “Speaking for the enlisted, sir, discipline is fraying. Fights and insubordination are up—tempers short. The ground troops need to get out and train somewhere other than cargo bays and simulators. The ones with families need to be able to live together. They all need a sky and fresh air, and bars and clubs and parks. Frankly, I don’t think we should wait. As long as the deal is good and the mission is doable, well... we trust you to lead us, sir.”

Those in the room murmured in approval.

Straker put his head down and nodded as he paced, hiding a swell of emotion at Heiser’s trust. It reminded him of his responsibility now—not just for people under his command, but their families, their children. It felt like a weight on his shoulders, reminding him of the stakes of this particular game.

He’d been saddled with this level of responsibility in the past as the Liberator, but it had been a long time. He hadn’t fully accepted that crushing weight again, but he knew he would eventually.

“Thanks, Sergeant Major,” he said. “I’ll do my best. So, we’ll move forward. As of now, treat this as a standard warning order and begin mission preparation. Commander Sindén, I’ll expect regular intelligence packages and briefings in the distro. Don’t neglect the Salamanders in your research. The more we know about them, the better off we are. Admiral Engels, please prepare a fleet battle plan. General Paloco, work with the brigade commanders and staffs to plan operations against likely Rhino ground objectives.” He held up a hand. “I know this is all very preliminary, but the sooner we start filling in the blanks, the sooner we get a handle on the situation. Dismissed.”

* * *

Finalizing the contract took three more two-hour sessions with the Salamanders. By that time the aliens seemed exhausted. Straker got the impression they were physically frail, at least outside their own environment.

But, they had ships, they had money, they had a war he could fight without feeling dirty—and they had territory to grant. So, in the end, Straker signed the deal, after Indy and a legal team went over the contract with a fine-toothed comb.

As part of their payment, the Breakers would get an uninhabited island in Salamander territory in the far north of Premdor, the Salamanders-Rhino common homeworld. The island would be cold and bleak through the upcoming winter, but had water, soil and sky.

The Breakers also got the right to mine fuel and ores from unclaimed parts of the Premdor system, and earn some Conglomerate credits through commerce. To get those credits, though, Conglomerate regulations mandated that that one of the two ranking members of any corporate entity had to register their corporation in person aboard Crossroads. That meant Engels or Straker.

The argument between them seemed inevitable, with Straker pacing inside their generously sized flag quarters, and Engels glaring, planting her feet on the deck with hands on hips.

“I can’t be on Crossroads navigating a bureaucracy while we’re in a fight!” Straker complained.

“Oh, and I can?”

“There’s two bad choices—you or me. It can’t be me.”

“Loco can handle the ground ops. You need me for the orbital battle,” Engels said.

“I could say the same in reverse. Gray can command the fleet action, where we have the advantage and will take all of a day or two. Ground ops will be much more involved, depending on how the war goes. And most important, I signed the deal with the Salamanders, not you. That means only I can alter or renegotiate it if there’s some surprise—and there always is.”

Straker tried to put his arms around her and she pushed him away with her palms, saying, “Why do I always have to be the compliant one, the reasonable one? I’m just as much a warrior as you. I’m sick of being sidelined.”

“Honey... you won the Liberation Wars, just as much as I did. It was your leadership, strategy and tactics that defeated our enemies.”

“Yeah, but nobody called me ‘Liberator.’ I’m just another sidekick, like Loco and Zaxby.”

“Loco... Yes, I guess you could call him a sidekick, but not Zaxby. He’s his own man... squid, whatever. He’s here voluntarily.”

“And that’s the point. You see him as an equal, but not me. You never have. Cosmos, I wish I’d insisted on command years ago.”

Straker turned away, oddly hurt. “Look, Carla... I don’t know what to say. There can be only one boss in a military outfit—and everybody has a boss.”

“Not you!”

“Yes, I do. The Breakers are my boss. My responsibility. I—I’m having to think about this in a whole new way, with all the civilians and kids and... and believe me, I’d like to dump it all and go off and live somewhere peaceful and raise our kids, but Karst—Steel—he didn’t let us. This isn’t about being the boss—but if you think it is...” Straker took a deep breath. “You can have it. You be the boss. It’s yours.”

Engels stared at him angrily. “You don’t really mean that.”

“Yes, I do. If that’s what you really want, I’ll go back and tell the Salamanders you’re in charge, and you’ll sign the same deal, and I’ll go to Crossroads and join you later. It’ll be a relief, actually. Later, I’ll run the ground forces, and you can have everything else.”

Straker had started to speak with the idea in mind that his words were a verbal feint, making an offer he knew wouldn’t be accepted, an olive branch that would get her to do what she needed to do. Now, though, he suddenly found himself willing to follow through—if she accepted. He still believed he was the better choice, but she’d be ninety-eight percent as good, and if that’s what it took to make her feel valued and respected, he’d do it.

She saw it in his eyes, the truth of his sincerity.

“You really would do that...?” she asked in a hushed tone.

“Yeah. If that’s what it takes.”

Carla came into his arms then and kissed him. “That’s the difference between you and Steel, you know.”

“That I’m a better kisser?”

“That you’re willing to step aside if it’s the right thing to do. That’s the mark of a leader over a tyrant, Derek—service before self, service to your people. That’s why I’m saying no.”

“No?”

“No, and yes. No, I don’t need to fight this time. Yes, I’ll go to Crossroads—but not because you were right about the details. Because

you're willing to be wrong, for me."

He kissed her lips, then her forehead and crushed her to himself with careful strength—lifting her on tiptoe. "Gods and monsters, I love you, Carla."

"I love you too, Derek. I'm sorry I got... annoyed."

"It's okay. You don't like to be sidelined before a fight because you're a true warrior."

She squeezed him, and then let him go. "I'll brief Ellen and the other ship captains, then I'll get going to Crossroads. I'll take the *Redwolf*, and I'd like Zaxby to come with me. I'm sure he can put some other War Male in charge of his skimmer squadron."

"Zaxby? Why?"

"Because I know and trust him, and he'll have an alien perspective. Crossroads is full of aliens—hundreds, maybe thousands of species. I may need his brain and his skills. I just wish I could have Indy on my comlink."

Straker smiled. "She's indispensable now, isn't she? Is she ever going to reproduce? Might be useful to have some more AIs."

"You'll have to ask her. Five years, she must be over Vic by now...or maybe not. Is perfect memory always a good thing? Can you imagine never forgetting anything? Never having your pain fade?" Engels tossed a few civilian clothes into a bag and then began removing her uniform.

Straker grimaced. "You don't have to go yet, do you? We won't see each other for weeks."

With a dance step, she whirled over to him, tossing her clothes aside to end up naked in his arms. "Don't worry. I'm not leaving yet."

"And neither am I, I guess."

"Nope. Lock the door, will you?"

Chapter 10

Admiral Engels, Crossroads

Engels piloted the yacht *Redwolf* toward the great trading post of Crossroads. Zaxby had agreed to come with her, saying, “I’m quite eager to see this remarkable place with my own four eyes. And, two heads are better than one. And, I’d like to get certified to do business with the Fugjios Conglomerate. And, to try out some exotic new foods. And—”

“And I get it. You’re bored after all this time in sidespace. Me too. Don’t enjoy things too much, though. We’re on a business trip, not a vacation.” She gave a rueful snort. “Business. I’ve gone from being a fleet commander to a sales representative.”

“Like the military, business is an honorable profession if it’s ethically performed, Carla Engels. Or should I say Carla Straker? It may behoove you to use your married name, at least as an option, to connect yourself with the official business entity title, Straker’s Breakers.”

“Official business title?”

“Yes, of course. It will have to be registered. Have you thought about whether you want it constituted as a limited liability corporation, or a standard corporation, or a non-profit corporation, or—”

Engels patted a pocket. “It’s all in the data stick Colonel Keller’s business team prepared, and we’ve got Indy on the FTL comlink for any questions... until they leave for Premdor.”

Although Frank Murdock, the Breakers’ resident mad scientist, had transferred the *Redwolf* to divisional ownership, he still considered it his baby. He was constantly tinkering with it, and had equipped it with every imaginable tech he could get his hands on or develop, so among other things it had a long-range FTL transceiver that allowed a datalink with Indy aboard the *Independence*. Through the datalink, Indy was able to maintain a remote consciousness, as if she were aboard, even from as far away as the edge of curved space.

Unfortunately, nobody’d created an FTL comlink with interstellar range... not that she knew of, anyway.

The tiny bridge of the *Redwolf*—more of a big cockpit—was barely large enough for the two passengers, considering one was an octopoid who massed around two hundred kilos, water suit included. The space didn’t

have a holotank, but its superb holoscreen made the viewers feel as if they were looking out a window at whatever was projected. During the long hours of travel inward from the edge of the star system, the two used it to examine the Crossroads station and its environs.

They'd need to know as much about the place as possible, considering how important it was to commerce in the area.

As they approached Crossroads, Engels opened the viewports and stared out of them, nothing but five centimeters of transparent duralloy between her and space. As they moved closer and closer on impellers alone, the giant station swelled until it filled half the sky.

Thousands—no, tens of thousands of ships, large and small, moved in a complex dance around and through the station. The closer they got, the more porous the structure seemed. Instead of a solid spheroid, the station was composed of a variety of shapes built one atop another, or tacked onto the sides or bottom. The direction didn't matter in space. It looked like a giant toy built by a child playing with a construction set, with little sense of long-term design.

The gaps between the vast sections allowed traffic to actually penetrate kilometers deep within the station, perhaps even to its very heart. Engels handed over the actual piloting to Zaxby and pressed her nose to the crystal like a kid looking in a shop window, her fascination for spaceflight and its craft rekindled by the bewildering array of ship designs.

Only a few were warships, and those all had a sameness in their color scheme and design, like black-and-white checkered harlequins or three-dimensional chessboards. They must be Conglomerate ships for local defense and enforcement, as other warships were prohibited in the area.

More interesting were the transports, passenger liners, couriers and utility vessels. Without the need for armor or heavy weaponry to constrain their designs, they could be made into any imaginable shape—and they were. Some resembled birds or fish, some were simple cubes or polygons—she was reminded of the geodesic Opter ships—and some showed graceful, even organic curves.

Could some ships actually be living beings? She'd heard rumors of such things, organic technology that grew structures instead of building them.

Her military eyes picked out weapons mounted on the Crossroads station—turrets ranging from point-defense up to megafortress-sized death machines kilometers long—energy projectors and railguns that dwarfed

anything she'd seen before. Towers sporting thousands of ports each must be missile launchers.

These weapons highlighted the defensive advantages of a station like this. Unlike a life-bearing planet, it had no atmosphere to interfere with launchers. It could be moved, if only ponderously. Its low gravity allowed for mind-bogglingly massive structures to be built. Supported by the warships she saw—and no doubt some she didn't—Crossroads could resist an assault by thousands of ships.

Or perhaps more. They might have completely unknown technology, including shields like the Crystals had used.

Murdock's team of brainiacs had developed Crystal-style shields and installed them on the Breaker transports—and now, on the captured warships too—but that was the easy part. The hard part was coming up with the sheer power to run the shields effectively. Murdock hadn't yet been able to reverse-engineer the singularity generators the Crystals used, so full-power shields could only be kept up for a few seconds at a time—or thin ones for longer.

Engels realized there was so much to learn out here. With relatively few aliens in it, human space was a monocultural flatland compared to Crossroads. She'd never really thought about it before, just taken it for granted that humans were dominant.

But out here, they weren't. It was a big galaxy, and humans were really just a small part of it.

How did Crossroads manage all the different environments needed? And communications, and food, and waste products? What about lighting? Heating? Visual and sound displays?

"Well, I guess we'll find out," she murmured.

"What?" Zaxby asked.

"I said I guess we'll find out how they manage all these alien species and their needs."

"That's one reason Crossroads exists and is so profitable. Nowhere else can everyone easily meet, with facilities that cater to all. If a new species registers, the Conglomerate assesses its needs and builds or modifies a habitat as quickly as possible—in order to get their business. Habitat sections are modular and movable. They are grouped by graduated environmental factors, not by species. We'll be docking at a section with the

environment most correct for humans. Aliens comfortable in that environment will also be common.”

“Speaking of docking...” The *Redwolf* slid, more and more slowly, into a universal docking cradle. Large padded clamps on arms gently seized the yacht and pulled her the last few meters into position. Like a living thing, a smart boarding tube extended and sealed its end over the ship’s personnel airlock.

When they disembarked, they passed through a series of sections that hummed, blinked and buzzed. In one place, Engels was directed in machine-generated Earthan to stand on specific spots on the deck, while Zaxby was directed in Ruxin to another. There they were examined for several minutes from all angles by sensors on arms which descended from the low ceiling.

Once past the examination, they found themselves in a large entrance hall where green-tinged humanoids directed them to separate, small, doorless booths. As soon as she stepped into hers, Engels’ comlink to the *Redwolf* reported loss of signal.

“Greetings, I am Overnica. Do not be alarmed,” an idealized holographic woman said in a smooth, academic voice—the warm voice of a kind, friendly teacher to a bright student. Engels couldn’t tell whether the projection was of an organic, or some form of AI-generated avatar. “Your communication will be restored once you finish your interview.”

“Interview?”

“All first-time clients must complete an interview for our records. Along with your biometrics, the baseline interview provides with the ability to positively identify every client and meet their needs. It is also used to establish and refine our ability to weed out disruptive influences.”

“Disruptive?”

“Anything that harms business will be mitigated. By entering Crossroads, you agree to abide by Conglomerate regulations and mitigation.”

Engels frowned. “Mitigation like what?”

“That is up to us. Mitigations range from warnings and nominal fines, up to termination of access for egregious or repeated breaches of major regulations. Additionally, any crimes committed on Crossroads or in Conglomerate space may be cause for punitive action.”

“How will I know what not to do?”

The hologram-woman smiled gently. “Any terminal, public or private, fixed or mobile, including this one, will provide instruction in our regulations. You may stay here in this booth for as long as you need in order to absorb them. If you have a personal device, you may register it and connect it with my systems. This is highly recommended. The regulations can be downloaded for your convenience. If you appear to be about to engage in prohibited activity aboard Crossroads, I will attempt to warn you. Do not fear! The Conglomerate is here to do business, not to trap you into a violation. Regulation Number One is as follows: do not do to others what you would not have done to you. Some call it the Silver Rule.”

Engels chuckled. “So you’ve had Earthan-speaking humans here before.”

“Of course. Many.”

“Are you an AI, Overnica?”

“Yes and no. I am not a machine consciousness. In fact, I am a synthesis of more than ten thousand brainlinked individual consciousnesses, processed and projected through Crossroads operating systems. Think of me as an ever-present client assistant, available around the clock to help you with your business.”

“Can you project yourself away from a terminal?”

“In many cases, yes. Simply call my name and I will try to help. Now, let’s get on with the interview.”

“What if I don’t want to do the interview?”

“Then there can be no business relationship between us, or the Conglomerate and your corporation. You will be escorted back to your ship and sent on your way with our regrets.”

Engels thought she saw a flaw. “There then could be some other kind of relationship, other than business?”

“For the conglomerate, there is no other kind of relationship except business.”

“Well, that simplifies things.”

“That is our goal. Business is a complex undertaking, and we seek to simplify it, or at least to manage its complexities, to the benefit of all concerned. Shall we begin?”

Three hours and hundreds of questions later, Engels stepped out of the booth, exhausted. “Cosmos, I need a drink.”

“Me too,” Zaxby said from a bench seat nearby. He stood, adjusting his water suit. “I found this interview process annoying and invasive, especially as I had grown accustomed to a great deal of power and autonomy as Grand Marshal of Ruxin. I am again reduced to being a sidekick. And, we need access to credit, I presume, to purchase foodstuffs.”

Engels shrugged. “If we want to use Crossroads, we have to play the Conglomerate’s game.”

“I still wonder if it wouldn’t have been better to remain outside the Crossroads system, making our own deals. In fact, that’s what we’ve done with the Salamanders. Despite all assurances, the contract Straker signed with them isn’t worth a quantum memory stick without some form of enforcement mechanism... which means, I suppose, I’ve argued myself back to needing this place.” Zaxby glanced pointedly around at the large hall, with its many booths and aliens.

Engels copied Zaxby, surveying the room. Around the edges there were purveyors of food and drink. Various beings consumed a wide variety of ingestibles. Humanoids predominated, many of them indistinguishable from Earth-derived stock, but there were others who apparently were comfortable in a human-style environment. She saw a herd of creatures that could pass for kangaroos in clothing—and a group of giant pink spiders clustered at one food stand, sipping from containers shaped like the green, headless bodies of puppy-sized beetles.

Or perhaps they *were* the green, headless bodies of puppy-sized beetles.

She frowned. “Look. Those guys that attacked us. The Art—, Ark—”

“Arattak—I see them,” Zaxby said. “But they’re unarmed and under Conglomerate law. Notice they are causing no trouble. Let’s simply stay out of their way.”

“Fine. I need something to drink and eat. One of these booths must sell human food—and something for Ruxins. You said we don’t have any credit? How do we get some?” Engels snapped her fingers. “Overnica?”

A hologram appeared. “How may I assist?”

“Can we draw on Breakers credit yet?”

“I have set up a provisional account for you with a limit of one thousand credits, payable according to standard terms. Your biometrics will be used to confirm your identity.”

“Put Zaxby on the account as well.”

“It is done.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” Overnica vanished. Rather, the hologram vanished—Overnica was still watching and listening, Engels reminded herself.

“I wonder if they have any snails?” Zaxby drifted toward the line of food booths.

“Fine, but nothing extravagant,” Engels said as she followed.

“Everything we buy, the Breakers have to pay for.”

“I will repay the Breaker credit with my personal funds.”

“In what form?”

“My research indicates pure platinum coinage is a common petty currency.” He dipped into a pouch on his water suit and showed a tentacle-full of one-centimeter silvery discs. “We are flush, as they say. I only have to exchange it.”

“Flush... That reminds me—I need to use the facilities. What about you?”

“My water suit is capable of processing my wastes for several more days.”

“Ugh. Forget I asked.” Engels headed for the marked privacy stalls. As she entered, a voice and hologram text told her she was being debited one credit to use it.

“What a racket,” she muttered. On the other hand, the stall was extremely well equipped, clean and efficient.

It turned out Zaxby was allowed to pay for the food in platinum. The change was returned to them in the form of account credit.

“The Conglomerate is clever,” he said. “Hard goods that enter the system are always converted into credit, allowing for conversion charges—a percentage point here, a percentage point there adds up. It also means they control the currency. Conglomerate regulations prohibit direct barter within Crossroads space. This means, in effect, that they track and control all lawful trade, and take their cut.”

“No wonder they’re so rich—and so protective. This place is a prize worth more than planets.”

They sat at available tables, and were debited another credit each for the privilege. “I can see why the Arattak are standing,” Engels said as she set to work on her curried tofu and naan. “A credit saved is a credit earned.”

A condiment tray rose from the table, providing salt, spices and sauces, some familiar, some unknown, but clearly labeled—and included in the

price of the seat, it seemed. “Ah, Trox puree!” Zaxby cried, snatching a bottle of sauce and sprinkling droplets into his snail bucket. “While the propensity to demand payment for everything is annoying, at least they provide value for money. And these snails are excellent.”

While Zaxby slurped up his slimy sustenance and Engels dipped her naan in her curry, she allowed her eyes to roam the bustling room. The Arattak seemed to be staring at her, though it was hard to tell with their wide-set compound eyes. “Zaxby, do Arattak have it in for humans?”

“My limited information suggests they see most other species in adversarial terms—as threats, competitors, or prey.”

“I’m feeling like prey right now. Overnica?”

The hologram woman appeared sitting at the table, prompting Engels to wryly wonder if Overnica charged herself for the privilege. “How may I help you?”

“Do the Arattak dislike humans? Because they seem to be staring at us.”

“The Arattak are xenophobic.” Overnica smiled. “They need training and psychoactive drugs to cope with Crossroads. In fact, the beetle juice they are drinking is a mild intoxicant. Don’t worry; we keep a close eye on them. I do suggest avoiding unnecessary interactions with them, however. Occasionally one of them can’t control herself. There have been incidents.”

“What kind of incidents?”

“Fatal ones. Consequently, their insurance requirements are quite high.”

“Why don’t you simply ban them from the station? Or restrict them to their own section?”

“Our actuarial analyses allow for the occasional fatality, as long as the expected profit exceeds the expected loss.”

Engels shivered. “So what you really mean is, if someone’s willing to pay, they can get away with murder.”

“If by ‘pay’ you refer to damages both compensatory and punitive, as well as the possibility of detention, banishment and revocation of trading privileges, then yes.” Overnica gave Engels a severe look. “Is the usual human system of punishment without compensation to the victim’s associates somehow fairer, or a better deterrent? I can assure you, ours is based on sound statistical models.”

“I’m not sure why, but I’m not reassured.”

Overnica shrugged. “You can always provide official feedback that will be considered at the weekly Regulations Committee meeting. Otherwise,

business must go on.” She winked out.

“Fear not, Carla Engels,” Zaxby said. “I am a warrior. I shall defend you against any and all threats—assuming I am present. However, at the moment, as a sailor in a strange port, I intend to seek at least one traditional form of entertainment. You may accompany or not, as you wish.”

Engels finished her drink and stared skeptically at the octopoid. “You’re gonna drink too much and get a tattoo?”

“No. I’m going to get laid.”

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Part 2: Mercenary

Chapter 11

Straker aboard *Independence*

Straker paced in laps around the perimeter of *Independence*'s Combat Control Center, the CCC, commonly termed "triple-cee," in the heart of the great ship. The original *Victory* design had provided a state-of-the-art facility for the commanders and staff of a task force to run system-wide operations. *Indy* and the Breakers' engineers had modified the complex—one large oval-shaped situation room surrounded by many smaller ones—to suit their own needs, but the layout was recognizable enough.

In the center, a retractable holotank rose from a large conference table. If the precision and detail of a holotank wasn't needed, holograms could be projected in the air above the table. Holo-capable screens and mini-consoles were inset flat into the table itself in order not to clutter up the meeting space. Modular, portable displays could be added as needed.

Around this, in the first oval ring, were the Breakers' divisional senior staff stations—Personnel, Intelligence, Command and Control, Logistics, Planning, Communications, and so on. The second ring contained support stations for these functions. These two rings and the meeting space in the middle made up the Pit.

The Pit had been so named because the third, outermost ring was set one meter above it, with a railing and an inner walk. Against the outer bulkhead, beneath a smart-wall of infinitely configurable screens and displays, various modular stations formed mini-control centers for designated combat units—ground force brigades, warship squadrons, or any other grouping the Breakers set up.

And, if needed, *Indy*'s maintenance bots and Gurung's technicians could reconfigure anything within a surprisingly short time.

Outside the third ring, accessed via twelve doors that led to as many passageways, stood suites of rooms for staff. Beyond that were all the more usual parts of a warship—quarters now full to bursting with people, mess halls and galleys, cargo bays and flight decks and weapons systems with their associated controllers.

Straker tried to walk every hall and look into every space over the past two months, but still there was more to see.

Now, though, he only walked the inner third ring, overlooking the Pit, as his commanders and staff showed up in their best and freshest working uniforms—not so fresh at all, he thought to himself as he sniffed the air. The *Independence* was under environmental strain, as all the ships were, with so many troops and civilians packed aboard, and laundry was a very low priority on the list of necessities.

“Good morning, sir,” a voice at his elbow murmured. He turned to see Commodore Ellen Gray in her dress uniform and forced himself not to frown. He and Gray had never really clicked, but Carla swore by the woman’s competence and trustworthiness. He didn’t need to personally like someone to respect and have confidence in them.

And now, Gray would be running the fleet battle to seize Premdor orbital space in Carla’s absence.

He had to resist the temptation to take over. He was no space tactician. He also had to resist the temptation to micromanage. The woman knew her job. Let her do it, he told himself sternly.

Yet, for the first time, the Breakers were going into battle as a community, not strictly as a military unit, with their fragile civilians on transports as an anchor to their maneuverability. Murdock and his teams had upgraded the transports’ defenses as much as possible, but they were no warships.

“Morning,” he replied. “One more hour.”

Gray glanced at the chrono numbers on the smart wall that counted down the time to in-system arrival at Premdor. “Do you have any last-minute instructions, sir?” she asked.

He studied the older woman’s face—not a pretty face, but a handsome one, full of character held in rigid check by the traditions of the service. “Yes, I do,” he told her. “Unless I say something, try to forget I’m here. This is your show until we secure Premdor orbital space. You’re in charge—and you’re a Breaker now. A rebel, according to Steel and his gang.” A smile quirked across his lips and he held out his hand. “I expect you to kick ass.”

Her prominent nostrils flared and her black eyebrows flew up to match Straker’s sand-colored ones, as if surprised. She extended her hand and shook his firmly with an answering, if cautious, smile. “I will, sir.”

“I’ll be on my link. Carry on, Commodore.” He stuck the comlink in his ear to emphasize the point and strolled out of the CCC.

He’d much rather remain there, but he wanted to give Gray the breathing space to take command of the operation. If he remained, he’d cast a shadow over her. Showing trust in her in front of the commanders and staff would bolster her authority and the Breakers’ confidence in the chain of command.

Straker quietly returned minutes before transit, to take a seat in the First Battalion’s mini-control center, next to Colonel Winter, its only occupant. The man nodded to Straker, but remained watching the transit countdown with his arms and ankles crossed, relaxed, his seat reclined. Nothing ground-force related would be happening for hours at the soonest, more likely for days.

“First Bat will get some heavy use, I think,” Straker murmured. “The Salamanders should cover the wetlands, and our armor can hold the coastal plains for a while but for the inland areas, it’s gonna be mechsuit-battlesuit teams for the speed and flexibility.”

Winter nodded again, still watching the chrono countdown. “I’m still concerned about resupply. The Rhinos’ ADA is pretty thick, so it’ll all have to be brought up on the ground.”

“Once we clear and hold orbit, we can suppress the worst of it.”

“Assuming the intel the Salamanders gave us is accurate.”

“Supposedly they don’t lie.”

Winter turned his hawkish face to Straker’s and blinked. “Religious taboos aren’t foolproof. Everybody lies. What about omission? Or mistakes? Or just bad intel? No battle plan survives contact with the enemy.”

“Noted. We’ll have the initiative, though. I won’t fight a battle we can’t win.”

“We?”

Straker showed his teeth. “I sure as hell won’t be sitting on my ass up here in the flagship, Martin. Don’t worry, you’ll be in command of First Bat—but I’ll be on the ground, with the Guard.”

“Good to hear... but I’d prefer if you didn’t have to send in the Guard at all.”

While First Battalion’s standard complement was eight companies of sixteen mechsuits each, equaling 128, the Liberator’s Guard was a special

unit under Straker's personal control. It consisted of two companies, plus Straker and Loco, and the Breakers' battlesuit training unit, titled *Cadre*. Straker also added in the Hok Company battlesuiters. The Guard's role was to remain with the command element to secure the rear, or to act as a needed reserve—to plug a hole or exploit a breakthrough, much as Napoleon's Old Guard had done throughout his campaigns.

The *ping* of the transit signal coincided with the chrono zeroing out. The feeling of being pulled sideways came and went, and the screens and holos populated with new data. The murmur of orders and comms rose as the full CCC swung into action.

"Indy," Straker said in a conversational tone.

A screen at his elbow glowed to life with the idealized woman's face Indy used. "Here, sir."

"Any surprises?"

"Not so far. I'll let you know."

Straker tapped his comlink. "I know you will."

"I could install a wireless aug for your brainlink. It would be much more efficient."

Suppressing a shudder, he replied, "No thanks—and please stop asking. Hardlinks are..." He glanced at Winter.

"Seductive enough?" the colonel supplied.

"Right. If I had a brainlink available all the time... well, I'm just not comfortable with that."

"I understand," Indy said. "However, I have one configured for you and available if an emergency arises."

"Noted." Straker gazed out over the pit, noticing that about half the staff had augs—small, unobtrusive thumb-sized devices at the napes of their necks—and another quarter were using their console hardlinks.

No doubt they were efficient. Hell, the expense of mechsuits was only justified by their superlative, brainlink-driven combat effectiveness, but troops—and spacers—needed to delink and recuperate. It must be the same for staff. It wasn't that different from stims—great in a crisis, but not for use all the time.

"Indy, you control all the augs, right?"

"All aboard the *Independence*, and I can access those aboard other ships when nearby. Does that concern you?"

“No... not in the way you mean, I think. I trust you with the power. You’ve proven yourself many times. No, I’m concerned about us frail humans and our failings. Can you program those things so they’re only allowed to be on when the user is on duty? I can imagine some people might leave them on all the time—they’ll end up dependent and addicted, and detached from the real world. Helpless if they lost their links.”

“Doctor Straker and the medical staff raised this concern long ago. We’re monitoring all personnel for signs of overuse and dependency.”

Straker chuckled. “So what you’re saying is, shut up and quit worrying.”

“I always value input from the commander, sir.”

“Thanks, Indy. Bye.”

The screen winked off.

“She scares me, sometimes...” Winter said.

“Don’t trust her?”

The man shook his head. “That’s not it. She’s too efficient, too perfect.” He waved at the Pit. “With a couple-three more AIs, we could do away with all the staff. A dozen AIs, and we don’t need spacers to run the ships, just bots. It’s not much of a jump to AI-commanded ships and AI ground troops. Pretty soon...”

“Who needs organics anymore? Yeah. That one’s as old as science-fiction. Maybe as old as religions and myths. Every culture has its powerful demons, ready to corrupt and supplant humans, sirens to lure us upon the rocks of our own navigation. Maybe we’re lucky human AIs all went mad until now—and even Indy isn’t a product of human technology.”

Winter stroked his chin. “Yeah, I always wondered about that. Who made the Mindspark cube? What happened to them? Were they a society of AIs? Are they still out there?”

“Zaxby said the Ruxins found it on an alien ship in the Starfish Nebula, and estimated it to be several million years old. The universe is, what, thirteen billion years old?”

“Something like that.”

“So thousands of great alien civilizations must have come and gone.”

“I wonder what caused them to fall.”

“If they’re anything like humans, it’ll have been their own damn fault. We can’t seem to stop repeating the same old patterns of tyranny and war.” Straker’s bleak, wintry smile soon fled. “We’ll always have a job, though.”

“God help us, you’re right.”

Straker chuckled. “God, huh? Religion’s catching on again, along with blasphemy. Nobody to disapprove. Besides, the military’s always been superstitious. Do it this way, not that way, or disaster will strike. The Huns tried to get rid of chaplains, but they never could, even if they watered down their doctrines to just the Unknowable Creator and a few moral principles. The Mutuality substituted the State for a deity, but that never really worked either.”

“No atheists in foxholes, right?”

“Not many, in my experience, no matter what god they call to.” Straker stood. “I’m going to take a turn through the Pit, then grab some chow. Care to come along?”

“Sure, sir.” Winter stood beside him.

Staff nodded and murmured greetings at Straker and Winter as they threaded their way through the crowded area. No ceremony here; it was a workspace, with formality suspended.

Commodore Gray sat at the conference table in the center, with slates, tablets and programmable smartcopy scattered across it. Straker and Winter took seats at the far end of the table while Gray received reports and gave orders. When she glanced at him, he waved her off as if to say *ignore us*.

The hologram above the table showed the system and the position of shipping. The Breakers had tightened their loose arrival formation and now cruised inward toward Premdor. They’d deliberately arrived well off the plane of the ecliptic, curving in from the stellar north. Because most routine system traffic tended to remain in that plane, in line with the bulk of the orbiting planets and moons and asteroids, this gave the intelligence staff a great view. It was like looking down from a height.

The six Salamander ships were traveling off to one side, in their own formation, slightly ahead of the Breakers. Straker approved. He was no space tactician, but he knew letting anyone behind your ships was risky—or trusting, anyway—exposing their vulnerable sterns, with the open ports of their fusion drives and thin armor.

The hologram zoomed in on the target planet, showing orbital space. No natural moons orbited the watery, island-scattered world, but there were twenty or thirty habs and captured asteroids. None of them were marked as fortresses, a relief. The Breakers had nothing that could have dealt with one of those monsters. There weren’t even any defense stations.

Red icons appeared—five, seven, ten. Rhino warships, annotated with a rough ship class assessment. The Salamanders had provided intel on their enemy's capabilities, but Gray was taking her time, seeing for herself.

"Doveryai, no proveryai," Winter muttered. When Straker looked a question at him, he said, "An old proverb in the language of the Russian branch of my family. Trust, but prove."

"A wise saying. The version I heard was 'trust, but cut the cards anyway.'" Straker sighed. "Feels different with all our eggs in one fragile basket and so many depending on us. Or maybe I'm getting old."

Winter chuckled. "What are you, thirty-three?"

"Something like that... but I'm a lot older than I used to be."

"Seeing your dreams die will do that to you."

Straker raised his eyebrows at Winter's bleak look. "What were yours?"

The colonel shrugged. "Victorious battles against a despicable enemy I grew up hating. An honorable career, family, kids, flag rank maybe... eventual retirement, all against the backdrop of prosperity and a society I could be proud of. Instead, now it's like that Greek god who pushed the boulder endlessly up the hill, only for it to roll down again."

"Sisyphus."

"Yes. We try to improve the Republic, but evil always seems to win out. The stone rolls down the hill again."

"Not this time," Straker said. "This time, we leave the hill behind and build something—a home, maybe eventually a world where we can create a society worth living in."

"So we won't be staying here." Winter gestured at the planet in the hologram.

"Probably not. It's not our world. If we stayed, we'd always be the alien allies of the Salamanders, with the Rhinos against us. No, this island they promised us will be a way station, but what we really need is our own planet. Or at least a big, independent hab."

"Too bad Freiheit is so small. What about having the Ruxins in the Starfish Nebula build one for us?"

"That's one idea," Straker said, "but we already owe Freenix and her people a lot. We'd need to pay her for anything more—and we don't have much to pay with. Then there's the problem of discovery. Add in all the Breakers and a bunch of ship traffic, and eventually we'll get found out. Then it's a fight again. Better that we're two solid months' travel away,

deep in alien space. Any Republic task force coming after us will be far from home, short on supplies and intel, with no official capacity, and surrounded by people that don't want them there."

"Right."

"Hey, boss." Loco came up behind Straker and sat next to him. "Learn anything?"

Straker waved at the holo. "You know as much as I do. It'll be a couple days before we engage. Lots of prep work, but not many command decisions yet. Besides, I'm trying to stay out of Ellen's way. It's her show."

"That's why you're sitting here at the center of things. You can't stand the waiting any more than I can."

Captain Jilani plopped down beside Loco. She'd changed her clothes, but the style remained the same—skintight black that emphasized her full figure. She'd reprogrammed her hair color to green-and-gold, though.

"Waiting's part of the job, *paisanos*."

Winter stared skeptically at Jilani. "What job is that, by the way? You never really explained what you're doing here."

"I trade in high-value materials. Now and again I try to do some good in the galaxy."

"Yes, but," Winter tapped the table with his index finger, "why are you *here*. With us, still."

"Because the highest-value cargo possible is information. You need me, and I figure I'm building up credit with the Breakers. General Straker here's a straight arrow. I'm sure he'll compensate me fairly down the line."

Loco chuckled. "And..."

Jilani elbowed Loco. "And, the Tarellians are persistent *figli di puttane*. Here, I'm safe."

"The ship that was chasing you." Winter frowned.

"Yeah. They discovered me reconning their zombie factory. I barely got out in time."

"Zombie factory?"

"High-value engineered sex clones. Low-IQ, humanoids mostly, but some custom-made exotics too. Live for five or six years, fuck anything you tell 'em to... Much better than sex bots, I'm told, if you like that type of thing." Jilani's expression soured. "After all, there's no fun in lording it over a bot. They're pricey, and tricky to incubate. They have to liquidate nine out of ten before they come to term. Makes me sick."

“Gods and monsters!” Winter said. “People buy these... things?”

“Things? Some would say they’re people. Their origin isn’t their fault. Bordellos use them, and twisted degenerates who can afford it. In some circles they’re status symbols.”

Straker felt his stomach turn. “That’s inhuman.”

Jilani snorted. “What humanity have you been living in? ’Cause in my world, people are scum, mostly, human or not.”

“Hey, we’re not scum,” Loco said.

“Jury’s still out on you, pretty boy.”

Loco opened his mouth like a surprised fish, and then shut it.

“And that’s not the worst thing I’ve seen,” Jilani continued. “Fairly tame, actually, but the Yellow Foot mob was paying me a lot for the info. Competitors, you know...” She sighed. “With no law out here, the best I can do is try to keep the criminals hurting each other while I make a living. Unfortunately, I was supposed to escape unnoticed with the intel. That didn’t work out. So, I didn’t get paid, I got chased... and here I am. At least you’re real humans. The other ones never smell quite right, you know?”

“Right...” Straker drummed his fingers on the table, thinking.

Jilani was a fount of information, well worth a reasonable payment... but was she trustworthy? And what was going on between her and Loco? Loco was looking possessive and overly casual, which meant he was trying to play it off... and despite Loco’s son, little Derek by Maria Campos, Loco hadn’t married her, or been exclusive for a while. Straker’d warned Loco to cool it a few times when it looked like he was fraternizing with someone under his command, but that prohibition was the job—military, not morality.

So maybe Loco hooking up with this streetwise, self-contained rogue wasn’t a bad thing. Loco could keep an eye on her, and she wasn’t forbidden fruit.

And something occurred to Straker. “Too bad we can’t get paid to go after the worst of these criminals.”

He saw Jilani’s eyes flash and her mouth twitch, as if suppressing a reaction. “Wouldn’t hurt my feelings any. And... maybe you *could* get paid.”

“How’s that?”

“Well, crimorgs don’t usually deal in registered credit. The Conglomerate’s anti-money-laundering division is hell on wheels, so most

of the mobs develop other ways to pay. They barter information or high-value trade goods—rare elements, antimatter, drugs, weapons... slaves. Anything that acts like currency, but isn't."

"Like raw gold and silver on Old Earth," Straker said. "Any of that would be useful, but we don't want slaves," Straker said.

"You don't?" Jilani grinned as if she'd scored a point. "What do you call these Hok you got running around?" She held up her hands to fend off Straker's immediate protest. "But who said those we rescue have to stay slaves? They did call you the Liberator, right? So start liberating! Free them and put them to work until they pay off their debt to you."

"Like the Old Earth pre-industrial navies?" Loco chimed in. "They'd take anyone and make him a seaman—no choice. 'Pressing,' they called it."

Straker allowed himself to feel surprised Loco was citing history. He was definitely interested in the winsome Chiara Jilani, trying to impress her. He was less impressed with Loco's reasoning.

Colonel Winter cleared his throat. "I bet Captain Jilani has some ideas about what crimorgs to hit first. General Straker, she just wants to use us to fight her battles. I'm surprised she's waited this long to bring up the idea."

Jilani raised a phantom glass to Winter. "You're a cynical son of a bitch, Colonel, but I like you anyway—and you're right. I do want you to fight my battles, but I wanted to see what you people are made of first. And, I figured you'd like to get to know me better too, before you send Breakers haring off to a fight I suggested. If you do, with my local knowledge, I'll be giving you value for value. We'll take down some bad guys, we'll all get paid, and I'll be right there alongside you with my ass on the line."

"And a nice ass it is," Loco murmured.

Jilani reached up and backward over her shoulder to slap Loco affectionately on the cheek. "Easy, tiger. Plenty of time for fun."

Bingo, thought Straker, but she's still playing with him. He hasn't got that self-satisfied look he gets when he's made his conquest. Well, let's see how long that lasts... "Yes, Captain Jilani—plenty of time. You've put the bug in my ear, but for now, we need to concentrate on *our* upcoming battles." He turned to examine the hologram again.

Chapter 12

Commodore Ellen Gray, in the CCC, aboard *Independence*

As General Straker and his coterie conversed at the other end of the table, Ellen Gray brushed at her dress uniform, still that of the Republic Fleet, minus the flag. Fortunately, naval jackets hadn't changed much over the centuries. Tradition ran deeper than in the ground forces.

Maybe it was because ships' companies tended to be tight-knit, unitary, independent, and subject to the whims of one person—the captain. They held strongly to tradition, an anchor in uncertain times.

For that reason she was glad Straker had given up his title of “Admiral”, one he'd never earned in her estimation, trading it in for “General.” It was a tiny detail, but like a rock in the shoe or a thorn in the foot, it had always annoyed her out of proportion to its real significance.

Admiral Engels, on the other hand, had earned her broad stripes. Gray was happy to serve under Engels, glad to have chance to prove herself by taking charge, aware of the tremendous, redoubled responsibility on her now.

Responsibility... Those damn civilians, aboard the transports again, all except for the ones on the flagship. The *Independence* remained back, guarding the vulnerable transports and exercising command and control, while her small but powerful squadron—three dreadnoughts, three heavy cruisers—advanced toward Premdor.

She glanced up at the hologram above the large central table, and then ordered the holotank's activation. Projected holograms were fine for low-resolution use, but without a holotank's specially designed and contained charged-particle atmosphere to fully reflect the multiphase lasers, they just didn't cut it for fine work.

The clear, cylindrical holotank, more than three meters on a side and two high, rose from the center of the table, already showing Premdor orbital space. Ten Rhino cruisers loitered in orbit, but there were no fixed defenses. The Salamanders said the stations had all been destroyed in the recent hostilities, the opening of the war where they were driven out of their own system.

Gray could see why the Salamanders were desperate to speedily retake orbital space, willing to make a favorable deal with the Breakers. The

planet's only shipyard contained a nearly finished Rhino dreadnought. They'd estimated two to four weeks until commissioning. Once she was launched, things would get that much harder for the Salamanders.

But Gray was confident. The intel on the Rhino ships showed a conventional, forward-focused weapons suite on a cylindrical hull, though they were stubby, wider than the usual human cigar-shaped vessels. They were also heavier, slower, and apparently equipped with hard shields similar to the Crystal versions—hard enough to allow for intentional collisions, when combined with extensive gravplating and structural reinforcement.

Ramming, in other words: a tactic they were only too willing to use. Ramming had accounted for their win over the Salamanders. The Salamanders couldn't cope.

So, note to all ships, she thought. Keep our distance, or stay out of their front arc. In line with that thought, she made a quick amendment to the mission orders and pushed the update through the datalink systems, emphasizing the warning. Then she sighed, wishing she could go along and captain her ship, but the whole point of this magnificent flagship was to allow the fleet commander to look at the big picture and issue orders.

As the Breakers-Salamanders force entered extreme range, the Rhinos retreated around the back of the planet, just as she expected.

Speaking of orders... She activated her comlink, already set to the channel of the flag comms team, the section that would smoothly pass her instructions to their intended recipients. "Gray here. Initiate Phase One."

These orders aimed the Breakers squadron toward the west, the antispinward side of the planet—in other words, if they were to follow through and take up orbit, they would be speeding over its surface with extra velocity, flying against the planet's rotation.

The Salamanders' squadron of six, on the other hand, was aimed at the eastern, spinward side. She'd insisted on this deployment, just as she'd insisted on being the overall commander of the space battle, above the Salamanders themselves.

Theoretically, this deployment made the Salamanders easier targets for the Rhino surface batteries of hypervelocity missile launchers, which could reach into orbit. The Rhino weapons used modified railguns to launch specialized guided missiles up through the thick, cloudy atmosphere. The combination of speed, accuracy and sensor difficulties made them a real threat.

The Rhinos, outnumbered and outgunned in space, and seeing two enemy forces, should logically choose to ambush one squadron at a time, as each rounded the planet. Gray wanted them to choose their rival, the Salamanders, the easiest to hit, the known quantity.

That's what she would do in their place. Defeat the Salamanders, then deal with these newcomers.

In fact, they might also believe defeating the Salamanders would cause the newcomers to cut their losses and break off.

In other words, Gray was as sure as she could be the Rhinos would go for the Salamanders first... and knowing what the enemy would do was half the battle.

Stealthy recon drones, fired in looping courses far above the planet's poles, gave her a view of the back of the planet, projected in the holotank. As expected, the Rhinos were deploying their ships to meet the Salamanders.

Closer and closer, with the Salamanders slightly in the lead by intention, the icons crawled across the holotank. As they approached the planet both groups slowed as if to insert into orbit. The top view, from the deep-space recon drone above the north pole, showed the firing angles as they began to intersect.

Less than a minute before the Rhino and Salamander forces would see each other around the intervening planet, Gray spoke. "Initiate Phase Two."

The Salamanders ceased decelerating. Now they cruised in a ballistic course, their stronger prows pointing toward the Rhinos as they flew through space, increasingly crabwise. At the same time, the Breaker squadron sped up, using brute force acceleration to shove its ships down toward the planet, barely skimming the atmosphere in a slingshot effect.

And, sixteen icons which had been loafing along between the two forces dove straight into the planet's atmosphere—and seemed to smash right into the ground.

The thought of the underspace-capable Ruxin skimmers passing through the planet itself filled Gray with chills, as if she were aboard. She wasn't sure if it was sympathy with the cold the octopoids were experiencing, or was it fear on their behalf at the weird, unnatural state of the little ships.

These maneuvers put the Rhinos in the middle of three forces, though they likely knew about only two, yet.

The Salamanders would be flying sideways past them instead of charging straight into them, firing their beams but expecting little success. The shots were mainly to keep the Rhinos' sensors focused on themselves, the obvious enemy. Their angled courses would keep them from getting rammed by the Rhinos or struck by surface battery missiles.

The Breaker squadron was there as the obvious threat. What would the Rhinos do? Chase the Salamanders away from the planet? Turn as one to fight the Breakers in low orbit, still with the support of their surface batteries? Or go forward and speed around the planet in orbit? This decision, Gray couldn't predict.

Though she had a guess... which turned out to be correct.

The Rhino ships continued their acceleration toward the Salamanders, lunging suddenly toward them at high speed. This left the surface batteries without space support.

"Breaker squadron, engage the surface batteries," Gray ordered. Her eyes roamed incessantly from screen to holotank to smartcopy, constantly watching for anything unexpected.

The Salamanders threw on flank acceleration, turning directly away from the Rhinos.

The Rhinos, now at medium range and closing, fired their weaponry—smaller versions of the surface batteries' hypervelocity missiles. Thirty missiles ran down the Salamanders as if standing still.

The Salamanders point-defense destroyed half of them, and then the target ships cut acceleration. Shields snapped on, briefly obscuring the vessels behind shimmering spheres of energy. The remaining missiles slammed into the shields and exploded, or disintegrated, depending on their warhead type. When the discharge cleared, the Salamanders sailed on unscathed. They'd put all their efforts into defense as Gray had ordered. They'd done their job—as a diversion.

Now, the Breakers heavy squadron dove into low orbit—active sensors pounding away through the thick clouds. As they located the surface batteries, they triggered their railguns at maximum rate of fire for a single pass.

Railgun bullets ranging from tiny clusters to lances the size of shipkillers screamed down through the atmo, glowing with the heat of their passage. Defenses countered, high-velocity phalanxes of millions of tiny projectiles, spreading in clouds to intercept. But these defenses were

designed to destroy missiles, not solid shot, which the Rhinos apparently didn't expect.

So, a lot of our opening attack got through, to pound the surface installations with kinetic energy and smash launchers, buildings, gantries and reload points.

The return strike was already in the air, though. Breaker sensors showed hundreds of speeding missiles climbing out of the gravity well as if it hardly existed. These rockets, given free head-starts by their railgun accelerator launchers, could reach tens of kilometers per second almost instantly, and they kept accelerating with their own motors.

Therefore, flight time from the surface ranged from two to five seconds, an unusually short time to react. SAI-controlled point defense plucked many of them from the sky as they cleared atmo. One cruiser—Gray's own *Samarah*, it looked like—used a shipkiller in defense mode, catching a group of more than twenty with a nuke as they closed in.

But more than half of them passed from short to point-blank range.

"Shields," Gray snarled—to herself, since there was no point in trying to tell the ships what they already knew.

As one, the Breaker ships snapped on full shields. They could only hold them for a few seconds, but that was enough. The wave of missiles crashed into the shielded ships. Several showed low-yield nuclear effects, and caused some missile fratricide. The Breaker ships all showed light damage—sensors and secondary weapons on the hull, mostly.

So, the Rhinos were willing to employ nuclear weapons—at least, against space forces. Lucky they weren't willing to put heavy, megaton-class warheads on them. She wondered if they'd use nukes on the ground—on their own territory, if it came to that.

But that was Straker's problem, not hers. Fleet officers were used to dealing with nuclear blasts in space, for their effects in sterile vacuum were so much less destructive than in atmosphere.

Suddenly, the icon for the Rhino dreadnought occupying the orbital shipyard flashed. "Warning. Bogey powering," the Sensors SAI said in alert mode. "Weapons active. Danger close."

The warning would be sent to the Breakers squadron, but how fast would they react?

Not fast enough. The Rhino DN, apparently playing possum and more ready than expected, launched a salvo of fast missiles from its position in

geosynchronous orbit above the Rhino surface batteries. They screamed in and downward.

“I should’ve insisted on hitting that first,” Gray growled to herself. Again, there was no point in sending orders. The alarm klaxons would be shrieking already—and there’d be little power for shields remaining in the capacitors.

“Don’t blame yourself, ma’am,” Indy replied in her ear. “The Salamanders were adamant they wanted an opportunity to capture the Rhino dreadnought. All indications were she wasn’t ready.”

“I still should’ve taken more precautions. Now, they don’t have shield power.”

The missile salvo arrowed toward one dreadnought, the *Battenberg*. The big ship hastily swung her stern away, presenting her heavily armored prow with full reinforcement. Point defense beams picked off several missiles, but more than ten struck.

When the sensors cleared, the *Battenberg* sailed on, still operational. Her bow was deeply gouged, shreds of wholly twisted metal like bat wings spread in all directions. One more head-on strike and she’d suffer severe damage.

“Pass to the *Battenberg*: withdraw to the flagship soonest and begin repairs,” Gray said, perversely glad she could give a meaningful order. “Then tell them to—”

The Rhino dreadnought, shaking herself loose of her moorings, abruptly exploded in a ball of nuclear fire. Skimmer icons shot past, up from their passage through the planet.

“Target destroyed by float mine,” Indy reported. “Apparently War Male Roxon took the initiative.”

“I can’t fault him for that,” Gray replied. “The Salamanders might be annoyed at losing their prize, but... fortunes of war.”

The other skimmers accelerated to chase the Rhino squadron as it gave up its own pursuit of the Salamanders. Stealthy and small, until now they’d probably gone undetected, but if the Rhinos looked hard at the sensor data surrounding their dreadnought’s destruction...

Leaving their fruitless chase of the Salamanders, the Rhinos curved around toward the planet. The skimmer squadron remained in their wakes, even though they could’ve turned tighter and made underspace runs from the flanks. The problem with underspace attacks in this new age of shields

was obvious: properly timed, raising a shield could block, even destroy a smaller ship using that cold dimension as it tried to pass through the shielded area.

A stray thought crossed Gray's mind. What would happen if a larger, reinforced ship in underspace smashed into a smaller, shielded ship? Could that idea be used offensively?

The skimmers were still useful, though. They were hard to see, hard to hit, fast and slippery, and the latest models were equipped with shipkiller missiles for standoff attacks. Right now, sixteen of them were dogging the heels of the Rhinos—and the Rhinos apparently knew it, as they launched a smattering of missiles backward.

But the skimmers easily avoided these weapons. Nothing slower than beams was likely to strike an SAI-controlled skimmer, which skipped in and out of underspace with machine-speed reflexes. Now, as long as Roxon didn't press too hard... Gray unconsciously reached out a hand toward the holotank and made a grasping motion, imagining they'd be crushed between two forces.

Or three, as the Salamanders were turning back as well. Everyone was re-converging on the planet.

What could the Rhinos do? They were outgunned and out-tonned, though they were still dangerous if they could remain within support distance of the surface batteries. In their place, the Salamanders had fled the system—and returned with allies. Would the Rhinos be that clever, that wise? They wouldn't surrender...but they could descend for planetary landing, to preserve their ships for a later fight.

The Salamanders had mentioned the Rhino biotech that made them more aggressive, so Gray was betting they'd go down fighting. That was their choice—but it probably meant more damage to the Breakers. Until now, the Salamanders had skated by as a diversion.

But it was the Salamanders' planet, the Salamanders' fight. Time to get them involved.

"Pass to the Salamanders: engage the Rhinos more closely. We'll hit them from the sides and rear."

"They acknowledge receipt of the message," the comms officer replied.

In other words, they might or might not comply. They weren't actually under her command. The best the Breakers had been able to get from them was "cooperation at their discretion."

The Rhinos were still heading for the planet. “More than one way to skin a cat,” Gray muttered.

“Ma’am?”

“Pass to the skimmers—continue harassment, but do not commit. Pass to Breaker squadron—loop around to their flanks at medium range. Keep them under continuous fire. I want them pissed off, with no good options. Force them to commit. Then pounce and try to rake them.”

“Aye aye, ma’am.” A pause. “All ships acknowledge.”

The two remaining Breaker DNs and three cruisers made a broad turn in loose formation, circling their opponents as the Rhinos returned to their planet. Salamanders chased them, attacking aggressively from the best firing position, from the rear.

The Rhinos tacked to their flank, flying crabwise to shield their sterns and aiming for the edge of their planet’s atmosphere. Their course would drag the pursuing Salamanders—and the skimmers—through the surface batteries’ engagement zone again.

Skimmers...

“Pass to War Male Roxon: pass through the planet to lay mines or launch missiles in front of the enemy’s predicted course.”

“Acknowledged.”

Within seconds, the skimmer squadron adjusted its course to aim directly toward the planet once more. They inserted into underspace and dove into the gravity well.

As the Rhinos and the chasing Salamanders rounded the planet in low orbit, the surface batteries launched another wave of hypervelocity missiles. These rose rapidly, spreading themselves among the six Salamander ships, which raised shields at the last moment in order to survive the blasts.

As the shields went up and the incoming missiles detonated, the Rhinos flipped end for end and waited... waited... When the Salamander shields dropped, all ten cruisers fired another wave of missiles, along with all their beams.

“Shit,” Gray heard from across the table. Through the transparent holotank she saw Straker, Loco and Winter rise to their feet and lean forward in concern as the missiles went home.

Just before they impacted, something happened that the sensors and holotank systems couldn’t interpret. The Salamander ships flared, and then explosions clouded the area for long seconds.

When the sensors updated and the cloud cleared, one Salamander ship was marked destroyed, but the rest sailed on with only moderate damage, surrounded by...something.

"Sensors! What the hell is that?" Gray snapped. "Give me a direct view. Indy, what do you see?"

A holoscreen nearby flickered, then showed a raw feed of one of the surviving Salamander ships. It was surrounded by a yellow nimbus of energy, like glowing ball lightning.

"It seems to be an energy defense," Indy said. "Not a screen, exactly. Something else."

"Make a guess."

"A guess? I'm not given to guessing, but a preliminary analysis would call it a fixed-quantum plasma screen. It should disrupt matter and energy that attempts to pass through it—or it through them."

The holotank showed the five remaining Salamanders accelerating directly toward five Rhino cruisers, who faced them, still flying ballistically backward.

"They don't lack for courage," Straker said.

Gray wondered which side Straker was talking about. "The Rhinos are saving their shields for when the Salamanders hit them with those... plasma screens."

"So it seems," Indy replied. "I'm interested to see what happens when they do."

Seconds later, they found out. The five Salamanders sheered slightly off-center at the last moment, so they blazed past their targets at close range—and the screens, like bubbles of liquid light, enveloped each closest Rhino ship for just a moment.

The effect was immediate. The bubbles clung to the enemy ships and remained behind, even as the Salamanders swooped past. The yellow plasma collapsed like popped bubble gum and ate at the Rhinos for long moments before it dissipated.

"Damage to the Rhinos?" Grey asked.

"Degraded hulls, degraded armor. Their externals have been burned off—antennas, sensors, point defense weapons. A nasty system, highly effective—part defense, part offense," Indy replied.

The damaged Rhinos, still peppered by a constant barrage of shots from the Breakers squadron, fired their backward-facing engines, slowing

precipitously.

“They’re de-orbiting, trying to land under cover of their surface batteries,” Gray said, recognizing the signs. “As they slow, they’ll fall. We’ve won the battle for high orbit.”

“Can we—” Straker started to ask, moving around the table toward Gray, and then stopped as traces surged up from the planet to intersect with the Rhinos’ projected courses.

The skimmers.

Straker’s eyes were bright with battle-lust, as were Loco’s beside him. Winter felt more composed, and Jilani hadn’t moved from her seat.

“There we go! Nail the bastards, Roxon!” Loco roared.

Straker clenched a fist as if to punch the air, attention wholly focused on the skimmers.

They spread out in a line and launched missiles—ordinary, slow-seeming missiles after the Rhinos’ hypervelocity versions, but each one a shipkiller or a decoy that looked exactly like one. They were perfectly placed, directly in the Rhinos’ path as the enemy ships descended into the thin upper atmosphere.

Unable to maneuver, out of shield power and with their point defense lasers burned off by the plasma bubbles, the Rhino ships were meat for the shipkillers.

“One... two... three...” Winter counted as the enemy cruisers met their ends. “...ten. Well done,” he finished as hundreds of meteors littered the Premdor sky—chunks of wreckage and debris from the annihilated Rhino fleet.

Cheers broke out briefly in the CCC as Gray echoed Winter’s words. “Well done, everyone. Initiate Phase Three. I want damage and casualty reports on my desk within the hour. Commander Sinden,” Gray said, turning toward the intelligence cell, “I’ll want an updated Rhino capabilities briefing by...1500 hours.”

“Aye aye, ma’am.”

“Nice work, Commodore,” Straker said, holding out his hand. “Carla was right about you.”

Gray raised her eyes to meet Straker’s as she shook his hand firmly. “We’ve got good people, good ships. And apparently our allies are no slouches. I’d love to see the specs on that plasma bubble—and those Rhino missiles.”

“Looks like we’ll have to dig up more brainiacs for Murdock’s team and put them to work. Carry on. I’ll grab lunch and see you at Sinden’s briefing.”

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Chapter 13

Zaxby on Crossroads

Sitting at the scarred plastic dining table across from Carla Engels, Zaxby hid his amusement at her reaction to his declaration that he intended to ‘get laid.’ Human females often seemed more prudish than the males when it came to sexuality, especially when in company with others—and sober. Perhaps they were more concerned with their reputations than the males, as once alone with their chosen partner, they were, on average, equally as wanton.

His research had demonstrated notable exceptions, of course. Ingesting alcohol and other social drugs, and the presence of other females in a setting where they outnumbered males and thus felt empowered, tended to reduce their inhibitions—as did the introduction of what they called “male strippers.” He also found it interesting that the default “stripper,” a person who disrobed for money in order to stimulate sexual arousal, was always female unless given a nomenclatural modifier.

This seemed to Zaxby an odd juxtaposition with his initial observation about female tendencies. If most females were more sexually conservative, perhaps the “male stripper” represented the breaking of taboo, and so was even more titillating.

The study of humans and their mating habits was endlessly entertaining, much more so than other species—except for Ruxins, of course. His study of his own species was far from over. As Grand Marshal of Ruxin, he’d made quite a dent in the various possibilities, but one could always find more experiments...

All this ran through his mind in a very short time indeed, the time it took for Carla Engels’s jaw to retract into its usual resting position and for her to regain the power of speech. “We’re not here for entertainment, Zaxby, or for you to go boffing some poor Ruxin prostitute paying off her debts with her body. We’re here for business!”

“I am fully capable of mixing business with pleasure, and if I did copulate with a Ruxin female prostitute, I would compensate her well and thus bring her closer to paying off debts, if debts she had, and so would not be taking advantage of her. However, the point is moot. I am not intending to mate with a *Ruxin*.”

Carla Engels understood his verbal emphasis, and her face reflected astonishment and revulsion. “You’re intending to have sex with... with... *what?*”

“Not what, but *whom*, my dear Carla. What you would so quaintly term the ‘red light district’ of Crossroads is famous across the Middle Reach. The offerings for creative mating are boundless, as are the many species represented. Are you morally opposed to consenting sentients providing mutual pleasure?”

“It’s just... it’s just...ew! With aliens?”

“I didn’t realize you were so speciesist. For shame.” Zaxby produced a sigh for Carla Engels’s benefit. He found these nonverbal shortcuts—the rolling of eyes, the smiles and frowns, the shrugs and so on—quite useful when communicating with humans. “You’ve lived a cloistered life, denied the cornucopia of experiences out here in the wider galaxy, Carla Engels, and you’ve never examined your own preconceptions. I, however, have earned a second chance at youth and adventure, and I’m going to *carpe the diem*. To paraphrase Loco, I intend to screw anything that moves. As long as it consents, and carries no diseases, of course.”

“You’re disgusting, Zaxby.”

“I’m sorry you think that, Carla Engels.” Zaxby stood, looming over her. “As my presence and intentions distress you, I will take my leave. Until later.”

He ambled away, leaving her no doubt stunned by his departure. Statistically, Crossroads was extremely unlikely to prove fatal, now that she’d been warned about the Arattak. She would be fine.

Yet a small twinge of guilt rippled within his overlarge brain and distributed nervous system as he slipped through his selected enviro-port and into the next environment. This one was moister, with a higher proportion of oxygen, which reduced the demands on his water suit. He performed a quick search of the area, but found no Ruxins.

He did find a currency processing center, however, where he traded 500 grams of rhodium he carried for more than 40,000 credits deposited into his locked and numbered personal account, one he’d set up during his time in the booth with Overnica, unknown to Carla Engels.

Calling for Overnica, Zaxby quickly contracted for an official Conglomerate bodyguard to accompany Engels as extra security. That would fulfill his moral duty and leave him to his own devices.

That concluded, he carefully examined the parameters of each of the sixteen enviro-ports available.

Each port led to an environment that was different enough in at least one aspect to require containment. That location then led to further changed environments. Eventually, by degrees, anyone could pass through the thousands of separated sections available, finding areas that were acceptable or inimical.

If the environment was inimical, protective and supportive equipment was available—for a price, of course—up to even a full mobility capsule in case he wished to enter an area as hostile as, say, a Thorian environment filled with harsh radiation, or the cold-methane atmosphere of the Bneem, either of which would kill an unprotected Ruxin within minutes.

But Zaxby was only moving toward more Ruxin-friendly environments. Four sections later, he found a close approximation, awash in salty water of a pleasant temperature and aroma, with perhaps a touch too much oxygen, but that was hardly something to complain about.

Poor Carla Engels, he thought with regret. She believed the often-silly alien Zaxby would abandon her to chase his own lusts. Not that his lusts didn't call him to the red-light district—he did intend to indulge himself later.

After all, the best cover stories were true and verifiable.

But not yet. Now, he needed to find a contact of at least moderate trustworthiness and reliability.

He located an establishment providing food, drink, and dim quasi-privacy. Several Ruxin neuters and one romantic trium occupied various areas. And his wasn't the only species comfortable in this environment. He spotted Eprem lounging in pools, and watched as a crustacean with feathery appendages debouched carefully from a glassy bubble, to submerge itself in a crystalline aquarium.

It appeared tasty, but of course, consuming other sentient beings was frowned upon, even if they died naturally or donated their bodies. So many taboos! Zaxby was glad Ruxins had so few.

A practical species, my own, he thought, and wondered not for the first time why an empire of nearly two thousand systems wasn't Ruxin instead of human.

But there was time in the universe for the turn of history. For now, his fate was bound to the humans, and more specifically to the Breakers. He

must contribute mightily to their success, as he always did.

If fact, he thought contentedly as he slipped into an empty demi-booth and soaked his lower tentacles in the water circulating across the floor, there would be no Breakers without Zaxby. Perhaps Derek Straker would consider a sub-unit more closely tied to his illustrious name. Zaxby's Zappers. Zippers? Zingers? Zebras? No, those all seemed juvenile. Zebecs, a type of ship? Zymes, short for enzymes? Zombies... not bad, if a bit macabre and unmilitary. Zanders? A type of fish, but not a predator.

Zaxby's Zealots? Now that had a proper ring to it.

He would think upon it further.

His musing was interrupted by a server, asking for his order. "Two Kree-bark teas," he said, and as soon as the server danced nimbly through the surf, a neuter joined him without permission.

Zaxby anticipated something like this, though, as he'd laid the subtentacles of his fourth limb in the Pattern-of-Expectation-of-Nonromantic-Conversation—one of the many social signals available to an erudite Ruxin. But would this fellow meet his needs?

"I am Yixnam. You're new to Crossroads," the neuter said in their common native tongue.

"I am Zaxby, and you are correct. Arrived today, for the first time."

"Perhaps you need information, or even a guide?"

"I am open to both. How private is this place?"

"It is wholly owned by the Syndicate of Squares, and thus is proof against all external spying."

"What about internal spying?"

Yixnam placed a device on the table and activated it. "This will disrupt eavesdropping."

The server set down the two mugs of tea. Zaxby slid one to Yixnam and sipped his own. "And Overnica?" he asked.

"Conglomerate regulations allow us to block all access by anyone and everyone, including Overnica—if we can. It is customary. Business must be conducted. Of course, others are not prohibited from attempting to spy." Yixnam sipped. "Ah. Kree-bark. Excellent vintage."

"Yet if all transactions must be conducted in credit and be processed through Crossroads..."

"I am a paid guide, and a personal assistant. What could be more ordinary? My rates do vary, though, based on the nature of the information

or services you request. Everything is confidential, of course, if you hire me.”

“How long does this confidentially last?”

Yixnam’s demeanor expressed guarded admiration. “A superb question, not always asked. It lasts as long as I am on retainer. Once you cease paying me, all confidential information is subject to further sale. Alternatively, you may purchase perpetual confidentiality with a larger one-time fee.”

“How much are your fees?”

Yixnam named various figures. Zaxby thought, offered, negotiated, was countered, and eventually reached an agreement. The two stepped outside the establishment for long enough to register their contract at the nearest terminal before resuming their booth.

“Let me speak plainly,” Zaxby said, “now that I’m your duly contracted client. I am in need of specific intelligence regarding certain persons, organizations and species. You will provide it to me, confidentially of course.”

“Of course. You have bought my knowledge and my silence.”

“I will also add a threat to the price. If you betray your contract, in letter or in spirit—note that latter stipulation—I will cause you and everyone in your genetic line I can find to be terminated. I assure you I have the power to do so with high probability of success.”

Yixnam, until now confident and urbane, darkened with mild concern, even fear. “I acknowledge your threat, warrior.”

“War Male, actually, though I find myself temporarily without a squid spear. I’ve been keeping company with humans too long.”

“Humans?”

“Yes. Have you heard of Straker’s Breakers?”

“Straker... Straker... a few years ago there was a moderately large war in human space. One of that name was prominent, I believe.” Yixnam’s eyes grew wide and all four turned to focus on Zaxby. “What is *your* full name?”

Zaxby repeated his full Ruxin designation, running to more than one hundred syllables.

The neuter turned dark purple. His ink sac quivered with the urge to squirt, and the creature tried to slither off the bench seat and into the water. Zaxby seized one tentacle, and then another when it became obvious Yixnam might shed it to escape.

As if by magic two large Karks, walking sharks with leathery skin and far too many teeth, appeared at booth-side. “Is there trouble?”

“My contracted employee seems to be attempting to violate its agreement,” Zaxby said.

One of the Karks checked a device. “The honorable Zaxby is correct. The honorable Yixnam is contracted. We will witness this violation to the Conglomerate if it continues. Honorable Yixnam, do you wish to voluntarily break your contract, and accept all penalties accruing to this action?” The Kark leaned in as if imparting a secret. “If you do, good fellow, you will be ruined. I see the penalties might go as high as 500,000, plus detention time, publicity—and they’ll suspend your certification. Ruined.”

“No, no...” Yixnam whispered. “Release me. I was overcome for a moment, nothing more. I will honor my contract. I suppose it’s my fault for not doing my due diligence. Oh, woe and despair, I shall be killed along with you. Curse me for a fool. You are that Zaxby who was until recently Grand Marshal of Ruxin. Do you not know there are two prices on your head?”

“Only two?” Zaxby examined the keratin of his subtentacles.

“Yes, the first is one million credits dead or alive by the human dictator John Steel, and the other is two million if dead, five million if alive, by Vuxana, Premier of our homeworld. No doubt assassins and bounty hunters are already on their way.”

“My, my,” Zaxby said, surprised at the high price but determined to cover it up. Vuxana must be quite angry with him for running off and leaving her gravid with another round of offspring, not to mention his commandeering of a squadron of the latest, most modern skimmers for what amounted to personal use. “I’d expected at least ten million. She must love me still.”

“Perhaps I shall experience love at some time,” the neuter mournfully said.

Zaxby patted the other’s tentacle. “There, there, good fellow. The vagaries of life may yet bring you joy. Until then, though, money and satisfaction of appetites will have to do. You have a good deal of my money; let’s get to work.”

By evening mealtime Zaxby was satisfied with his initial progress. After its initial despondency and fear, Yixnam rallied like any good, dutiful neuter

should and provided Zaxby with a wealth of needed information. Zaxby let the fellow go. He had arranged an appointment for the next morning after inviting it to accompany him to the redlight district—an invitation which Yixnam declined.

That was probably for the best. No need to shock it with Zaxby's wild proclivities.

For the next three hours, he indulged those proclivities with three different non-Ruxin sell-sexes, all of them Conglomerate-bonded and certified disease-free. He stayed away from the less-reputable establishments, where the certificates might be forged and the medical examinations might be less than thorough.

The cost in credits was high, but that was the price for secure, consequence-free pleasuring.

Hmm, Zaxby thought afterward. Perhaps I'm not so wild after all... but no need to be a fool when indulging one's lusts. My money is my own, and I have plenty of it, so why not?

But all good things must come to an end, as the humans said, so he rubbed body parts regretfully with his last companion, a Croatoan cephalopod female superficially not too different from a Ruxin, but with certain exaggerated physical characteristics he suspected might be the result of surgical alteration. That didn't materially change his enjoyment of them, though.

He tipped her well and went his way. If he were a stereotypical human he'd be whistling in the most carefree manner, filled with the warm afterglow of pure relaxation combined with the stimulation of new experiences and the illusion of conquest.

This pleasant combination disappeared, as expected, when he appeared at Carla Engels' hotel room. After dismissing the bodyguard, he knocked on the door and was let in by the grumpy human female. By her smell, it appeared she might be entering that phase of her pseudo-estrus cycle characterized by emotional volatility.

No matter. Creatures must cope with their own biological peculiarities on their own—especially humans. When had a human ever cared about Zaxby's physical status? What with the dryness of their atmosphere and the tastelessness of their food and the chafing brought on by extended periods in his water suit, they should be thanking him for every interaction.

"Deal with it," Loco would say.

Zaxby dealt with it.

“Where the hell have you been?” Carla Engels’ expected harangue began.

Zaxby endured it as cheerfully as a human owner welcomed the yapping of a dog’s daily greeting. “I believe I explained my intended activities already,” he said, patting her on the shoulder.

“Don’t touch me with those tentacles. I don’t want to even think about where they’ve been.”

“You have nothing to fear. All of my encounters were certified, and I washed thoroughly afterward.”

“And you left me after telling me you’d protect me.”

“I did protect you by providing a bodyguard. You are perfectly safe and unharmed, are you not?”

Carla Engels merely crossed her arms below her modestly sized mammaries and sulked.

“Here, let me call room service for a nice beverage and snack tray. Some tea and finger sandwiches, perhaps? Or wine and cheese?”

“Don’t try to mollify me.”

“Why not? Mollification results in a more pleasant social atmosphere for both of us, does it not?”

“You have an answer for everything, don’t you?”

“Not everything, no. There are many scientific mysteries left to be investigated—”

“You know what I mean!”

Zaxby sat at the dinette table and folded his subtentacles together, fixing her with all four eyes. “Of course I know what you mean, Carla Engels. You’re my friend. I’ve studied you extensively, and I’m a brainiac. But because I’m your friend, and I know your strength, I refuse to coddle you when you become childish and petulant.”

“Petulant? I’ll...” She ground to a halt. “I am being petulant, aren’t I?”

“I would have to answer in the affirmative.”

She took a deep breath and let it out, blowing her black bangs briefly into the air. “Okay. Let’s reset. No harm done. I’ve gotten the Breakers accounts set up and started on the list of suppliers, supplies and prices for certain critical items. We’ve got a million-credit loan-line secured by a lien on the *Redwolf*. That’ll let us get started on buying the things we need most

first thing tomorrow. Anything we can't carry, we'll arrange for delivery to Premdor."

"Excellent. Very commendable."

"You *will* be available tomorrow to inspect and buy? No more, uh, entertainments?"

"Of course, Carla Engels. I'm all business from now on. Well, at least during the duty day. What I do after hours is my own affair, don't you think?"

"I guess it is... *after* hours."

"You might be pleased to know I did do *some* work today. I hired a bonded guide and purchased its permanent silence. Tomorrow, it should provide me with enough information to begin establishing a rudimentary—and entirely legal, if clandestine—intelligence network here at Crossroads."

"With what money?"

"My, my, how quickly money rears its ugly head." Zaxby grinned to show he was joking. "Never fear, I have my own sources of portable funds. I was Grand Marshal of Ruxin, after all."

"Good. Breakers money needs to go for Breakers needs."

"Of course, though I would say that this intelligence network should greatly benefit the Breakers, and I hope that once the organization is solvent, I will be allocated a budget for these purposes."

"As long as the money doesn't go for your... indulgences."

"I will scrupulously keep all private and public funds separated. May I say that you are adapting to the mercenary lifestyle quite well, Carla Engels?"

"Gee, thanks, I think. Whatever happened to money being the root of all evil?"

"I believe the actual quotation reads 'love of money' is the root of all evil, and that is demonstrably false. There is jealousy, hatred, vengefulness, laziness, selfishness, cruelty, among others—there are many sources of evil. Money makes a fine tool, but a poor master."

Carla Engels grasped his tentacle. "How'd you get so wise, Zaxby?"

"I *am* more than two hundred years old, despite my svelte and sexy appearance."

She snatched her hand away and stood. "Ick. Thanks for reminding me. I'm going to wash my hands and go to bed. Good night, Zaxby. See you at..." She checked her chrono in puzzlement.

“I suggest we use Crossroads time while we’re here. It’s based on a 30-hour day. Overnica can provide an app for your chrono. I will be at your door at 0800 local. Good night.”

Zaxby contracted an environmentally appropriate room for himself in the same hotel and soon stripped out of his water suit to lounge in a warm pool of perfect salinity. A robot cart delivered abundant Ruxin delicacies, alive and directly into his pool, which he harvested and consumed with great relish while listening to some excellent music and drinking fermented alkaloids appropriate to his species. These Crossroads businesses certainly did know how to provide luxury service.

He declined, however, to send for another sexual companion. That would simply be indulgent.

It was nice to be wealthy.

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Chapter 14

Zaxby on Crossroads

The next day, Zaxby met Carla at the appointed time. He had already dined sumptuously in his own room, so he took her to breakfast in the hotel dining room. Watching her eat with great affection, he nibbled on a few Ruxin foods that didn't distress her female squeamishness.

He had observed that human males were generally less fussy about what they ate. On the other hand, human males were generally boring creatures, unable to hold more than one thought in mind at a time.

Zaxby performed the Ruxin equivalent of a sigh, through his gills, muffled by his water-suit. Ruxins were in all ways superior—but humanoids seemed to be everywhere.

The universe was seldom fair.

Breakfast improved Carla Engels' mood considerably, and the day's shopping was reasonably successful. Zaxby introduced her to Yixnam, who guided the two to various sections of Crossroads, vast showrooms where goods were displayed for examination and sampling. Attentive sales representatives answered questions and took their orders for vital spare parts, ammunition, weaponry, shield upgrades, preserved foodstuffs, farming equipment and many more items.

"Our million's going to go quick," Engels grumbled as she checked her handtab. "We really need about a hundred million, just for this trip."

"If you need large numbers of credits, you can always license or sell technology," Yixnam said. He had recovered his composure since yesterday and seemed resigned to working for people with prices on their heads. After all, assassinations or kidnappings were extremely rare in Crossroads proper. "There's nothing so profitable as a new, yet tested item that can be quickly manufactured and brought to market. I can connect you with a reliable tech broker for a reasonable fee."

"We'll definitely need to explore that possibility. Zaxby, do we have anything we can sell or license?"

"Indubitably, my dear Carla." Zaxby tapped his large, soft head with the tip of a subtentacle. "It's all up here. Every item, every spec."

"I know you're a brainiac, but I didn't know you had a photographic memory."

“I do now. Let’s discuss this further in private. Yixnam, lead us to a secure place that serves decent food and drink.”

“Of course, War Male.”

Within a private section of a superb restaurant, Yixnam set his anti-sensor device next to the food and turned it on while Zaxby locked the door and checked for anything amiss.

Carla Engels sipped caff appreciatively, and then said, “What’s all this about having the specs?”

“Brainlink hard storage,” Zaxby said, tapping his head again. “I added many improvements to my cyberware over the last five years.”

“And made yourself the target of anyone who wants to rip it out of your head if they want to. Now, someone could steal your information—our information—all at once,” Engels said, frowning. “That’s why operational military personnel don’t carry around big databases of secret data—it makes them vulnerable. Leave that for the intel specialists in the rear, like Sinden.”

“I’m aware of the risks, and I have many countermeasures in place. Also, you *have* realized by now that I’ll do whatever I please at any time, don’t you?”

“Yes, actually, I do know that, though you’ve never stated it so baldly.” She sighed. “Fine, whatever. Now let’s figure out what we can sell or license in good conscience.”

They spent the next few hours comparing tech available to the Breakers with items widely available on the open market. Of course, only a few things might be truly unknown—things like the subquantum viral Mindspark technology that even then they only partly understood. That and its derivatives such as Murdock’s rejuvenation pod were quickly put off-limits.

However, there were lesser technologies, or twists on technologies, that were undoubtedly known, but which no other species had yet released, sold or licensed. There were also technologies that replicated known effects in completely different ways, avoiding patent-infringement problems, and were cheaper.

Carla Engels’ astonishment at the potential profits of such licensing amused Zaxby. As Grand Marshal of Ruxin, he was used to shuffling billions of credits for government or industrial programs. A billion here, a billion there, and pretty soon it wasn’t money anymore, not in any real sense. It was just fuel for industry. A being, a person, could understand

thousands of credits, perhaps millions, for the luxuries they could buy and the things they could own, but at the higher levels, such numbers became comprehensible only in terms of trade, influence, power—and high-ticket items, like ships and mechsuits.

For the wealthy who could have any luxury imaginable, money wasn't money anymore either. It was merely a way of keeping score or outdoing their fellow beings who traveled in the same rarified circles. Zaxby had been there for the last five years, and it had become tiresome. He was having much more fun down here in the muddy fighting pit—metaphorically speaking.

Still, it was good to be rich. Being rich was like having the best weaponry in reserve.

A way to win.

A way of keeping score... with the added incentive of securing his existence and the existences of those he cared about.

Nothing made a fellow feel so alive as risking death, after all.

They settled on several minor technologies, such as those used in the polymeric musculatures of mechsuits and battlesuits, that seemed to be more advanced than anything commercially available in the Crossroads markets, and spent the rest of the day meeting with Yixnam's technology broker.

By the end of the week, they had their hundred million credits up front and ongoing contracts that would yield at least as much or more in royalties every year for the next ten years.

"Cosmos! I can see why people come here," Carla Engels said as they ate yet another sumptuous meal celebrating their windfall. "Only a week past, and we've made a fortune!"

"Yes, we have," Zaxby said, "but remember, we did that by unlawful means—at least, according to Earthan Republic law. We mutinied, stole proprietary technology, and have now resold it on the open market."

"Gods and monsters, I never thought of that."

"That's why you keep me around—to remind you of reality. And, in for a cent, in for a credit, as they say."

Carla's expression soured. "You mean 'as well to be hanged for a sheep as a lamb,' I think. We've already mutinied against an illegitimate regime. Selling some tech can't make it any worse, I guess. And we need the money. Damn, that's a lame excuse, but it's true."

“You’d feel much better if you let go of your contradictory scruples and simply did what needed doing.”

“I can’t abandon all my principles.”

“I’m not suggesting you do, merely that you abandon your guilt when you must violate them.”

Carla sighed. “I wish I could rationalize everything as easily as a Ruxin.”

“Yes, it is unfortunate all other species aren’t as sensible and competent as we.”

“Or as humble.”

Zaxby created a smile. “I do admit humans have the edge in humor. You need it to shield yourselves against the despair of your lesser existence, eternally falling short of the ideal. Fortunately, we Ruxins are happy to help.”

“I’m not happy,” Yixnam muttered. “I’m under contract.”

“So you are,” Zaxby said. “But what would make you happy, friend Yixnam?”

“Friend?” The neuter seemed astonished, even gratified.

“Of course. As long as you are faithful and of good will, you are a friend.”

“I’ve never had a friend.”

“That’s another way humans are better than Ruxins,” Carla said, after sipping loudly and waving her glass of wine. “We make friends easier.”

“And enemies,” Zaxby said archly. “But to be fair, I do admit that humans have a knack for binding people to themselves with their generosity and openhandedness. Or perhaps it’s their naive innocence—like cute, furry infant pets.”

“It’s called loyalty, Zaxby,” Carla said, pouring herself more wine. Zaxby thought she was becoming somewhat inebriated. She pointed at him with her glass, slopping a bit of the drink over the side. “Listen, Yixnam, if you ever want to be more than just a contracted employee, you could always join the Breakers.”

“That would merely be another kind of contract.”

“We don’t view it that way.”

“You’re a mercenary organization. How could it possibly be otherwise?”

Carla set her glass down and pondered visibly. “We didn’t start out that way, Yix. We’re a band of brothers and sisters, a family. We’ve been through thick and thin together. We don’t think in terms of contracts. Contracts are all well and good, but loyalty always trumps contracts. Don’t you have anything you want to be loyal to—and have people be loyal to you in return?”

“That would seem like a paradise. I’ve never experienced anything like that. I was spawned here on Crossroads, where everything is a matter of regulation and contract. There is no higher loyalty than a contract... so the Conglomerate says. But most of us freelancers know there must be something more.”

“There *is* something more,” Carla said, taking Yixnam’s tentacle under her palm. “You can have it if you want it.”

Zaxby widened his eyes in order to communicate surprise. “Carla Engels, is that wise? Yixnam is competent, but it is a neuter.”

“You were a neuter when you joined us, Zaxby. How did you feel then?”

“I felt liberated,” Zaxby admitted. “Yes, you are right, Carla. It is wise to allow Yixnam to join the Breakers—as long as it knows that loyalty runs both ways. The price of treason is much higher than that of contract default.”

“Quit threatening him, Zaxby! It’s cruel.”

“It’s an *it*, Carla. In our society, what you would call a second-class citizen.”

“We’re not in *your* society, Zaxby,” Carla said harshly, glaring and almost knocking over her half-empty wineglass. “We’re Breakers. We don’t have second-class citizens.”

“What about our enlisted personnel? Are they not of second class to officers?”

“Only in their military roles, not in their value as people. Any enlisted person can become an officer if they qualify and pass the training.”

“And any neuter may become gendered—but until they are, they remain what they are.”

“I would like very much to be gendered,” Yixnam mumbled.

“Neuters don’t remain ‘what they are’ in the Breakers,” Carla said, still glaring. “Now who’s being speciesist?”

“Neuters are not a separate species.”

Carla stood, visibly angry, and tossed off the rest of her wine. “Quit splitting hairs. I don’t care what you call it. We’ve worked with Yixnam for a week here. I can tell when someone’s a good guy.”

“As with Karst?”

“*Argh!* Zaxby, you’re worse than Loco sometimes, with your smartass answers for everything. Sometimes you have to go with your gut, and your heart.” She slapped her upper chest and swayed. “I say Yixnam can join the Breakers, and I’m in charge here—right?”

“You are definitely in charge here, Carla Engels.”

Carla turned to Yixnam. “You want to join the Breakers?”

“I would like that very much.”

“Then raise your right hand—your right tentacle—well, any tentacle, and repeat after me. I, Yixnam—”

“I, Yixnam—”

“Do solemnly pledge—”

“Do solemnly pledge—”

Zaxby didn’t allow his pleasure to show as she administered the oath of enlistment to Yixnam. Let Carla think she had won her point, rather than being manipulated into doing exactly what Zaxby wanted her to do.

What did the humans call the technique? Ah, yes—good cop, bad cop. Frighten the weak personality into dependency on the sympathetic authority figure, and one could safely control it indefinitely. After all, it was much cheaper to pay Yixnam a salary than to pay its contracted fees—and by taking an oath to the Breakers, Yixnam was in technical violation of its contract. The neuter was now legally and morally bonded to the Breakers—and to Zaxby—like cyanoacrylate glue.

One other advantage occurred to Zaxby: he wouldn’t need to include Yixnam in any procreative trium in order to influence it. That had been his backup plan, to bond Yixnam by mating, along with some as-yet-unchosen Ruxin female, but poor Yixnam was a singularly unattractive specimen, and boring as well.

And Zaxby was far too old and rich to be bored.

* * *

By the time Zaxby, Carla and Yixnam left Crossroads three weeks later, they had spent most of their liquid credit, loaded the *Redwolf*’s tiny cargo

bays full of high-value items and her data storage with encrypted copies of the information Yixnam had gathered in the process of setting up Zaxby's unofficial intelligence network. Contracts and payments to information agents trickled downward through nonbonded, unofficial contacts. They eventually exchanged hands in the unofficial currencies of Crossroads—small amounts of the valuable substances that passed for cash in the underground economy.

The conglomerate was practical enough to recognize that crime and violation of regulations could never be stamped out. As long as it remained suppressed, statistically under control, the organization was completely phlegmatic about it—a recognition that some activities are not worth the trouble of prohibition, especially when those activities represented relatively harmless outlets for vice and criminality.

Better to keep an eye on such things than to try to eliminate them entirely, Zaxby knew. That way, when some greater crime reared its ugly head, one could always shake down “the usual suspects,” using their lesser offenses as leverage.

All this and more Zaxby thought about during the sidespace voyage back to Premdor. By now, Straker and Gray would have finished their military operation, presumably successfully. They would be in possession of Breaker Island and in much need of the thousands of tons of vital supplies even now also heading for Premdor on the capacious cargo ships of the reputable firm of Headleigh Transport and Transshipping, Incorporated.

All in all, he had experienced a wonderful month.

Zaxby sincerely hoped there would be some fighting left for him. He dearly loved a good, violent opportunity to detonate multiple explosive devices, resulting in the death or dismemberment of properly designated enemies.

It was, after all, one of the top perquisites of being a War Male.

Chapter 15

Straker, CCC, *Independence*

As Straker sipped his caff and waited at the flagship's CCC central table for the briefing to begin, he wondered how Carla was doing. The truth was, he actually rather preferred to have gone to Crossroads himself and let her handle the preliminary battles here, but he thought he was better equipped to deal with the Salamanders in case anything strange came up. In his estimation, the risk of a misunderstanding with their client-allies was greater than the risk of something going wrong on the heavily monitored, heavily policed commercial station.

That didn't mean there was no risk to Carla... but he couldn't do anything about it. He had to trust the two of them would be careful, do what had to be done, and get the hell back to the Breakers as quickly as possible.

The rest of the senior commanders and staff finished arriving. Commander Sinden picked up the cursor and activated her comlink so those elsewhere could follow along with the simulcast. The holotank rose smoothly from the table's center, and the lights dimmed for better visibility.

"Good afternoon Generals, ladies, gentlemen, and others." She nodded politely to several Ruxin neuters in the second ring of seats, and she may have winked slightly.

Was that a glimmer of humor from the too-earnest brainiac, Straker wondered? Or was she simply being over-thorough, covering all her verbal bases?

"With the destruction of eleven Rhino warships, we assess the threat from high orbit and outward is *low*."

"We're sure nobody's hiding on any orbital habs or facilities?" Commodore Gray asked.

"We're sure, ma'am. They've all been scanned thoroughly. Salamander marines have occupied the critical ones. All non-secured weaponry has been destroyed by pinpoint fire—even anti-debris lasers, at your orders."

"Go on."

The holotank zoomed in on the small world's single main continent, a slug-shaped land mass nine thousand kilometers long by two thousand wide wrapping halfway around the planet and straddling the equator. Thousands

of military icons appeared in dense clusters—near cities, lining the coast, and at the tops of mountains.

“Enemy atmospheric defenses remain extremely dense. The Rhinos have militarized their economy and embarked on a building program designed to dominate their planet. In fact, I suggest the Salamanders downplayed the threat in briefing us.”

“So much for not lying,” Loco muttered.

“Like lawyers in a courtroom, is what Captain Jilani said,” Straker reminded him. “That’s why our own intel people are conducting such a thorough analysis.” He nodded for Sinden to continue.

“While we hold the orbital ‘high ground’ and are relatively safe from their long-range weaponry, our resources pale in comparison to that of an entire world. The closer and lower in orbit we get, the more the advantage shifts to their favor—as more of their systems can reach us. They simply have much more.”

“So, further low precise firing passes are out of the question,” Gray said flatly.

“That’s an operational decision, ma’am, but our simulations show that employing such tactics would be costly.”

“What about long-range bombardment?”

“We could bombard them at our leisure with captured asteroids, but the collateral damage would be extreme. Sufficient bombardment to degrade the military threat by fifty percent would also devastate the ecosystem. Or we could go for saturation missile strikes with enough nukes to get through. Collateral damage would still be high.”

“Our contract already prohibits that level of devastation,” Straker said. “Where does that leave us?” He already knew, generally, but he wanted Sinden to move on to what really interested him.

The inevitable ground action.

“The good news, General, is that this atmospheric defense buildup means their ground defenses are relatively weak. It appears the Rhino war strategy has been to shut down the Salamander ability to fight them in the air or reach targets with missiles. Interestingly, the contested wetlands are not particularly secure. A suspicious mind might almost think they were inviting attack and casualties—or at least, they don’t particularly care about their own lower classes who occupy the dense housing recently built there.”

Straker nodded. “The wetlands are slums, then. The Rhino leaders have secured their rear areas and their economy, and are cynically using their surplus poor to deny the Salamanders what they need—which happens to also be right on their sea border. They know the aquatics’ ability to invade dry land is limited.”

“Correct, sir. Because of that, the Rhinos have deprioritized conventional ground forces. Once inside their territory, their underbelly is quite soft. Depending on our objectives, Breaker ground forces should be able to operate with high effectiveness in the short term.”

“And in the long term?” Straker asked.

“We’re fighting a whole world, sir. The Salamanders have to quickly use the opportunity we create to employ their own forces toward their chosen military objectives. If they fail, we will have to extract within five to ten days, or face slow annihilation. If they succeed, we will still need resupply and rotation to a secure base for repairs and rest.” Sinden straightened. “I’m also concerned with the lack of objectives, sir. I can’t make proper assessments unless I know what our specific goals are.”

“Indy, did the Salamanders give you the data you requested?”

“Within the last few minutes, sir. With your permission, I’ll take over.”

Sinden’s usual stiff demeanor chilled further as she put down the cursor and assumed a position of rigid parade rest. Apparently some professional jealousy there, Straker thought. Hard for an officer whose value rested on her mind not to feel helpless in the face of an AI that could think a thousand times faster than she could. It might make her wonder whether she were even needed.

But Sinden was needed, along with the multiple organic viewpoints of her team. It was stupid to have one person in charge of everything, no matter how capable. A military unit needed redundancy and freedom of thought to work well.

And there was always that niggling concern in the back of every human’s head, wondering if—or when—Indy would go insane, like all other AIs before her.

“Go ahead, Indy,” Straker said. “You first, and then we’ll continue with Commander Sinden’s briefing.”

Indy’s holo-avatar glowed to life across the table from Sinden, appearing as a woman of indeterminate age and no particular beauty clad in

the uniform of a ship captain. Straker guessed she was trying to seem as plain and professionally low-key as possible.

“The Eprem’s—the Salamanders’—main concern is the chemical weapons the Rhinos are preparing to use against the aquatic regions.” The avatar gestured, and a thin cursor beam emanated from her hand to point at areas within the holotank as she recited. “The weaponization depots, where the trinary chemicals are loaded into munitions and deployment systems, are in these four dispersed locations, deep in their rear areas. They are in turn served by these twelve chemical factories. Each factory produces one of the three chemicals needed to create the poisonous agent. The chemicals are shipped in liquid form on trains to the depots. Each chemical is toxic, but not weapons-grade, by itself.”

“So we can hit the factories, the trains, or the depots,” Straker said.

“Or the hundreds of precursor suppliers to the factories,” Indy said. “Each stage is more heavily guarded deeper inward.”

“How close are they to deployment of the poison?”

“The Salamanders judge two weeks, plus or minus a few days. This agrees with my own assessment.”

Straker drummed his fingers. “Is it too late to hit the precursor production?”

“Not if we did it immediately. If we performed a low pass, combined with subsurface skimmer ops, we could set them back one to three months—but as Commander Sinden already pointed out, we’d take heavy ship damage.”

“And if we hit the factories?”

“We need to strike within five to seven days to be sure.”

“Factory defenses?”

“Moderate and thickening. The Rhinos must be aware of the Salamanders’ desire to stop production.”

“What about striking the trains?”

“It’s nearly the same timeline,” Indy said. “The trains will begin running as the chemicals become available.”

“How long are the train routes?”

“Fifty to one hundred kilometers each.”

Straker mused, glancing at Loco, Heiser and Winter nearby. “So, we either hit fixed, heavily defended targets, or mobile, hard-to-cover ones.”

“Or the central depots,” Loco said. “That would cut our targets from twelve to four.”

“No,” Sinden said, apparently unable to contain herself. “We don’t need to hit twelve of the chemical factories, only four of them.”

“Of course,” said Straker with a snap of his fingers. “As long as we destroy one hundred percent of *one* of the three chemicals, they can’t make the poisons.”

“A fine insight,” Indy answered mildly. “There’s a problem—the Rhinos know this too. If they run the trains at variable times, they will severely complicate any plan of ours to destroy the entirety of one type of chemical.”

“So the safe bet is to hit the factories—all four of one kind of facility. How much will that set them back?”

“Three to six months. That satisfies the Salamanders’ initial requirements.”

“Is one or more of the chemicals less stable than the others?” Sinden asked. “Harder to manufacture?”

The avatar highlighted four factories out of twelve. “Yes. This one, designated Romeo. These are also the most heavily defended factories. Sierra is also volatile, and requires special handling. Tango is relatively stable, and its factories the most lightly defended.”

Sinden smiled thinly. “Perfect. The Rhinos have made a mistake.”

“A mistake?” Indy asked.

Sinden’s smile broadened, as if she had scored a triumph over the AI. Straker wondered whether Indy was sandbagging, throwing Sinden a bone, or whether the AI actually missed something. “As Romeo is the most fragile chemical, that’s the one we *don’t* need to destroy. Time and complexity will do it for us. If we hit the *most* stable of the three, chemical Tango, which is also least defended, we leave them with the two hardest to handle.”

“But the most complex factories will be the most difficult to rebuild,” Gray said. “Shouldn’t we hit those?”

“My analysis shows Commander Sinden is correct,” Indy said. “I also recommend attacking chemical Tango first. We might be able to hit the others afterward. The situation will be fluid.”

Straker rubbed his hands on his knees, taking a deep breath. “Not the weaponization depots? We sure?”

The holotank zoomed in and highlighted the center of the continent as Indy spoke. “The depots are the farthest in, with the heaviest defenses.

Anything coming in by air or drop will be shot down. General Straker, do you really want to cover an extra hundred kilometers' distance and hit harder targets—targets they fully expect to be attacked?"

"Probably not. Anyone with dissenting views?" Straker swung around in his chair to make sure everyone had a chance to be noticed. "Then it's the Tango factories. But we don't tell the Salamanders our exact objectives yet. We have no idea how well they can keep a secret from the Rhinos. Indy, you done?"

"I am."

"Commander Sinden, please continue."

Sinden stepped forward again and picked up the cursor, clearing her throat. "Thank you, sir. The Salamanders have two other major long-term concerns to be addressed after the short-term chemical threat is degraded. One is the seizure of their wetland breeding grounds. They want them back. The problem is, even if they win and a settlement is reached, Rhino aggression and overpopulation won't go away. The wetlands will always be under threat, and they're difficult to defend."

"Not our problem, as I see it. We leave the wetlands to the Salamanders themselves. We have enough flexibility in the contract to do that." Straker interlaced his fingers behind his head and leaned back in his chair. "You mentioned two concerns? What's the other?"

"Yes, sir. The key issue, the root cause of this whole war, is the Rhinos' new biotech. Before its introduction, the two races lived in relative peace and cooperation. Now, the entire character of the Rhino species has changed."

"Changed how?" Straker asked.

His sister Mara stood. "Glad you asked. It's all about sex."

Loco's sleepy eyes opened wide. "Usually these briefings are boring, Doc, but—"

Mara smiled and jabbed a finger at him. "Shut up and let the grownups talk. Like I said, sex. As with most sexually binary species, the Rhinos have cycles that ebb and flow. Females come into estrus, give off pheromones, males respond and compete for the females, they make babies. Historically, a combination of culture, drugs, and a relatively low birthrate kept their society stable, with slow, manageable growth. Then came this biotech."

"Which did what exactly?" Straker asked, trying to avoid a history lesson.

“Rejuvenation. The biotech lengthened life, reinvigorated the old. Unfortunately, according to Salamander intel, some greedy Rhino smuggled out an early, unfinished version and sold it to a rival biotech company, which rushed it to market without adequate testing. It spread like wildfire, self-administered and sexually transmitted. It made them youthful, yes, but it also left the Rhino breeding cycle permanently turned on.”

Loco guffawed. “So their males are running around with permanent hard-ons and their females are all like cats in heat, barefoot and pregnant.”

Mara snarled, “You may think that’s funny, *General* Paloco, but it’s a disaster for them and for the Salamanders. Their population exploded and continues to do so. They’re all acting like horny, drunk adolescents, and none of them want to give it up. They’re addicts—they can see what’s destroying them, but they just want more. They can’t quit. Not on their own. So we have to do it for them.”

Straker cleared his throat loudly. “It’s not our job to fix their society, Doctor.”

“Didn’t seem to stop you before, *Liberator*.”

Straker controlled his temper. “It didn’t—but my viewpoint’s changed. I’m not in that business anymore. We’re here to do what we’re getting paid to do and to lose as few people doing it as possible.”

“Why can’t we do both?”

Gray spoke up. “The Salamanders must be working on the problem themselves. Some kind of reversal process? A cure? As General Straker says, we’re being paid to stave off disaster and buy them time, not to solve all their underlying problems.”

Mara placed her palms flat on the table, speaking earnestly. “They don’t have the biological expertise. I’m not sure we do either, but we’re more advanced than they are. Between me, Indy, Murdock, the Ruxins and some other good people on our side, we have a shot. Look, I’m a doctor, and I’ve got a chance to cure an entire society of a disease that’s killing them. How can that be wrong? We have to try.”

“Let’s say you came up with this cure,” Straker said. “How do we get them to take their medicine? They won’t want it.”

Mara took a deep breath and crossed her arms defensively. “I’m working on that.”

“Fine. Keep working, but your priorities have to be with current operations—and with our own people. Understood?”

Mara glared at her brother. “Don’t patronize me, Derek. I know my job. Don’t forget, I developed the biotech that runs through the veins of all our combat troops, yours included. But imagine if it made us all into berserkers, attacking everyone. There would be two options. Kill or cure. If we don’t cure the Rhinos, they’ll never quit expanding. They’ll wipe out the Salamanders, overpopulate their planet, and move into space. We’ve got a chance to prevent that. *I’ve* got that chance. We have other doctors for routine work, but there’s only one me. I’m like you, Derek—the best at my particular job. So just let me do it!” She threw up her hands and stomped off.

Loco muttered something about Mara needing her own cure. Straker sighed as others around him turned their eyes away in embarrassment, but he refused to fool himself—Mara was right, in her way, even if an intelligence briefing was the wrong time to say so.

He raised his voice. “Doctor Straker is only trying to do what’s right, but that’s for another day. For now, we do what’s right by serving our clients. Commander Sinden, please go on.”

“Thank you, sir. Now, I’ll go into detail on the Rhino ground defenses.”

Two hours later, Straker called an end to the briefing, saying, “Let’s take a break. Nancy, put the rest of the information on the network. I’ll send you my intended course of action by 2100 at the latest. You can work up combat route packages overnight. I want those packages loaded into all vehicle and suit SAIs by noon tomorrow, continuously updated. Plan for a combat offload and movement directly to assault, maximum optempo, within the next 36 hours. Brigade and battalion commanders, join me in Conference Room Two in one hour to hammer out our draft battle plan. Dismissed.”

Chapter 16

General Straker, Premdor-2, on the beachhead

Back in a mechsuit again, Straker breathed deeply. It felt good, as it always did, like a familiar drug, always waiting and ever calling.

Like the addictive Opter nectar that he'd beaten. He seldom thought about it nowadays, but when he did, he tried to put it out of his mind. It reminded him every strong man was just one weakness away from disaster... especially a man with responsibilities balanced on the edge of a knife, where one mistake could destroy all he loved.

One of the benefits of being part of a vast, legitimate military was the knowledge that the power structure would take care of the families of warriors that died in the line of duty.

No more.

He checked the command feed on his HUD. Twelve hours ago the Salamanders were conducting diversionary attacks along the continent's northeast coast, drawing Rhino forces and attention in that direction. At the same time, they had de-orbited a couple of mined-out asteroids, aiming them toward two Rhino military bases, forcing them to waste shots on rocks, keeping them busy.

Now... now, as night fell, the real invasion began. The Salamanders, eyes used to the dimness under the sea, swarmed ashore on the southwest coast, into a great patch of former wetlands, preceded by short-range saturation missile fire from submarines. The incoming, surprising swarm of attack weapons took down the defenses in short order, or at least kept them busy until the amphibious Salamander fighting vehicles raced ahead and blasted the emplacements, point-blank.

Then they blew holes in the levies and dams which kept the water out. Fresh water poured in from the reservoirs while salt water flooded in from the sea. Soon, the streets were awash with water a meter or two deep.

The Salamander vehicles needed water like Breaker armored vehicles needed air, so they stopped at the edge of the wetlands and fortified against a counterattack. At the same time, the Salamanders' equivalents of military police began the laborious and dangerous task of clearing the blocks of high-rise residences full of Rhino families.

Better them than us, Straker thought as he keyed his comlink. “Go time, Colonel Winter.”

“Roger wilco, sir.”

The entire First Battalion, First Brigade—the mechsuits, which Straker still thought of as a regiment, though he had reorganized the unit in fitting it into the Breakers—surged forward out of the shallow water they waited in. The pilots enjoyed the violent movement after their hours of being encased in the suits as they were ferried to the surface of the ocean, out of range of Rhino missiles, and they took advantage of the opportunity, stretching out and running through the wetlands like men splashing through ankle-deep water. Now and then one fell, or sank in a wet hole, but mechsuits made for space could hardly be slowed by mud. Not with jump jets and stabilizers to keep them moving.

Each mechsuit was accompanied by a five-troop squad of battlesuits for support—Rippers, the latest, speediest version available.

The unopposed mechsuits and battlesuits covered the fifty kilometers from shore to the edge of the wetlands in less than half an hour, racing through the Salamander formations. Straker watched them from the beach, standing with the Guard: thirty-two more Foehammers—two companies of sixteen each, plus the special Cadre Battlesuit Company and Hok Company, and himself and Loco in Jackhammers.

He had more mechsuits aboard *Independence*, but few fully trained pilots.

He felt lucky to have the ones he had.

“Okay, move out.” Straker walked briskly forward, keeping to a Rhino-built road atop a levee, leading the Guard in First Battalion’s wake. The rest followed in a long column, conserving strength and fuel.

Behind and beside the Guard, Breaker armored vehicles—the rest of First Brigade—surged out of the surf and spread out across the spiderweb of wet roads. They headed for dry land in three axes of advance. Hovers popped to the surface and started their fans, skimming over the swampy ground to scout ahead.

“I wonder how Hetson’s doing,” Loco comlinked from behind Straker.

“He’s a platoon leader in First Bat, isn’t he? Why do you ask all of a sudden?”

“Just remembering the last time we fought a real enemy in mechsuits.”

“The Crystal megaship.”

“Only four of us survived—you, me, Hetson and Adler. Then those assassins killed Adler... Hetson’s the only mechsuirer besides us who fought for the Liberation. The rest of them were Republic pilots. They were standard First Regiment guys before transferring to the Breakers.”

“You don’t trust them?”

“I trust them. They’ve been with us for years. Their families are with us. They didn’t bail back there on Culloden. I never really felt like they were Breakers, though. Not like the old days. Not... blooded.”

Straker smiled, unseen. “These are new days, new blood. New fights, new blood-brothers. You’ll feel different after this op.”

“Yeah.” Loco paused. “So what do you think of Jilani?”

“As a person? Seems all right. She’s been helpful. Why? She not giving up the goods to your godlike sexual magnetism?”

“It’s just a matter of time.”

Straker grinned. “She dresses, uh... with intensity, and she swears like a sailor. You sure you’re what she’s looking for?”

“I’m trying to smoke out her game. Playing the fool.”

Straker laughed. “You do that pretty well.”

“Best if everybody believes good ol’ Loco is still thinking with his dick. Then she’ll believe it, too.”

“I was starting to wonder myself.”

“Oh, I’ll hit that ass hard if I get a chance, but I’m not a kid anymore either, Derek. My upper head is in control. Most of the time...”

“Good. Chat’s over, though. I need to keep my mind on the battlefield.”

An hour after sunset, First Battalion met its first enemy unit, racing toward the beachhead. The Rhino armored formation appeared powerful, but without orbital reconnaissance, and with Salamander ADA—
atmospheric defense artillery—keeping the enemy spy drones far back, they were completely unprepared for mechsuits, something they had never seen before.

As Straker hoped.

Fighting against mechsuits took a tightly integrated combat formation—something like a Mutuality Hok brigade, in other words. The feed Straker tapped from First Battalion’s lead element showed the Rhinos had the illusion of one—a close-order phalanx, in fact, precisely regular, like a parade ground. One hundred eighty squat heavy tanks, all one type, with

extra-large unturreted nose railguns, a turreted electric autocannon above and behind.

It reminded him of the breakthrough tactics of Old Earth's Soviet Union of the twentieth century. Cram a whole lot of heavy tanks into one spot and smash anything in front of you, casualties be damned. It probably worked just fine against the Salamanders, at least on dry land.

Straker wasn't worried. Colonel Winter would eat them alive...always assuming there were no surprises.

The Rhinos obviously knew some kind of enemy was in front of them, as they probed with fire, lobbing explosive shells over the low horizon, to fall scattered among the spread-out mechsuit squads. The mechsuits easily dodged the indirect fire, their SAIs providing instant predictions of their fall, enough to leap out of the way.

"Rippers, dismount and stand by. Alpha and Bravo, advance to contact, and then withdraw. Pull them forward," Straker heard Winter order. "Charlie, Delta, advance to flank them on each side. Echo, Foxtrot, swing wide and slam the door."

Cannae. From the top, in Straker's HUD, it looked like the battle of Cannae, where the brilliant Carthaginian general Hannibal Barca, facing a larger force of Romans, entrapped them in a perfect double envelopment, surrounding and annihilating them.

Two mechsuit companies of sixteen Jackhammers each teased the Rhinos forward, firing and then withdrawing behind low hills and scattered copses of trees. Winter brought up Hotel Company, his Sledgehammers, to the reverse slope of a ridgeline behind the Foehammers and used them to snipe from long range, further goading the Rhinos to attack.

He kept his Ripper squads in reserve. No enemy infantry meant no reason to commit his own. Not against a pure tank force.

Two Foehammer companies jogged to the flanks and took the Rhinos under fire where their large main guns couldn't face without turning the entire tank sideways. Two more companies of Foehammers raced flat out to the enemy rear and then, as one, rotated to strike the Rhino formation.

The Rhinos turned outward, trying to form a defense, but it was too late. They were seeing new monsters that strode over the battlefield, firing advanced weaponry that ripped open their tanks from above, the sides and the rear, Disorganized and no doubt terrified, they broke trying to scatter and save themselves.

No tank escaped.

Straker could have ordered Winter to let them flee, once they were no further threat—but give them a day and they would be back on the battlefield. A few crewmen survived by bailing out of their tanks. Those were ignored. The Breakers weren't monsters, to murder the helpless. But every tank was disabled or destroyed, quickly and efficiently.

At this moment Straker wished he were with them, just another mechsuit under someone else's command, with no responsibilities, lost in the pure exhilaration of combat.

First Battalion smoothly resumed its travel formation and jogged forward over the rolling hills.

By this time the Guard reached the edge of the wetlands, in the wake of First Battalion's advance. Straker could see the deep footprints in the soft ground leading northward. "Deploy and follow me," Straker ordered.

His two mechsuit companies spread out in standard skirmish formation, diamonds of four-mechsuit squads in a long line abreast, one hundred meters between them, forming a front eight hundred meters wide. Behind them, the Cadre battlesuits jogged on the left, the Hok on the right. The terrain here was nearly flat, with slight folds in the ground, rising gently toward hills in the distance, hills First Battalion had already reached and passed.

The lights of towns showed here and there, but Straker ignored them, passing between them, following First Battalion. The Guard would be their backup, their reserve, and would hold their line of retreat open if the Rhinos tried to cut them off.

Suddenly, the high sky lit up with hundreds of streaks, inbound from the north, passing overhead, aimed at the wetlands.

Long-ranged artillery—missiles and other projectiles. The Rhinos must have decided they wouldn't be retaking the beachhead soon, and so they were harassing their enemies to soften them up. They would be deploying mobile artillery units into firing positions, but for now, this ordnance was being fired from the strategic emplacements.

Salamander missiles and beams responded from behind the Guard, rising to intercept the incoming fire. The Guard's travel became surreal—a stroll beneath a celebration of fireworks, debris and spent shrapnel. It rained on their armored heads as they advanced at an easy steady pace.

"Indy, any opposition developing in front of the Guard?"

“None. Your only current threat is from indirect fire.”

“Thanks. Straker out.” He switched to the Guard channel. “Battlesuits in ride mode. Execute.”

Each battlesuit squad of five bounded to its designated mechsuit and leaped aboard, grasping handholds installed for this purpose. The mechsuits could handle the extra five tons each without difficulty, and this preserved the charge on the battlesuits. First Battalion would be doing the same as it moved from fight to fight.

On his HUD Straker watched the remainder of First Brigade—his conventional mechanized battalions—spread outward from the beachhead, extending the perimeter behind him. It was critical to seize territory for the duration of the raid, to force the Rhinos back from the wetlands and expand the bubble of ADA that covered the Guard and Salamanders.

On the left, westernmost flank, Second Battalion encountered stiff resistance from fixed defenses backed up by combat forces, and fell back. They set up a defensive line in a stalemate. On the eastern flank, Fourth Battalion expanded its perimeter out to their planned limits and stopped, waiting for the inevitable counterattack. The only question was, would it come that night, the next day, or later than that?

Fortunately, the Breakers owned orbital space. They should see anything developing.

Just give me tonight, Straker thought, or prayed. One night is all I need.

But he knew the Rhinos were aggressive. It wasn't likely they would spend their time waiting and mobilizing, organizing, and deploying. They might throw their units into the fight straight from their garrisons, piecemeal, as soon as they figured out the other Salamander attacks along the coast were diversions.

In this case, they would be right to do so. The Breakers were using a mere brigade—elite, yes, and with technology superior to their enemies, but without the numbers and reserves to fight a prolonged battle.

Given time, the continent full of Rhinos would crush them.

Straker refused to give them time.

In the sterile safety of *Independence's* conference rooms, it had seemed clear what his role would be—to place the Guard as a mobile connector between the raiding First Battalion and the relative safety of the Breakers armored perimeter. But here, on the battlefield, it seemed like a waste to be commanding this small but powerful combat force and do nothing but wait.

He checked his HUD, but saw nothing militarily significant within fifty kilometers. “Indy, analysis: where’s the nearest enemy target to my position? Something we can handle, something we can hit and run.”

“You’re changing the plan?”

“I’m improvising. The more confusion we cause, the harder it is for the Rhinos to concentrate against First Bat. We won’t deviate too far.”

“There are militia units in every town, but they are of no military significance.”

“Not interested. Find me something that matters. Something to cause chaos, something to draw forces away from First Bat.”

“There’s a drone base seventy kilometers to the west,” Indy said. Straker’s HUD map flashed. “Ground defenses are light, but the drones themselves are CAS models. They’re on alert. I assess they’ll launch within two hours.”

“We’ll take it. We’ll hit them half an hour from now. Straker out. Guard, new orders, target: drone base *here*.” He pushed the data to the Guard HUDs. “Here’s our course and timing. We move fast, hit them hard, and egress along *this* route to rejoin our earlier support corridor. Battlesuits, remain in ride mode until we engage.”

Straker accelerated smoothly, conscious of his passengers. Riding a bounding mechsuit was unsteady enough without making it any worse. Besides, he needed to stay low. There were too many local ADA point defenses to risk getting above the nap of the ground and into their engagement envelopes.

Ten kilometers later, as the Guard passed a small town, about 200 Rhinos with nothing but small arms—local militia, in other words—charged out to meet them.

On foot.

The battlesuits immediately leaped off their mechsuit steeds and raced to assault, while the mechsuit pilots instinctively hosed down the enemy with gatling rounds. The thumb-sized bullets ripped through the enemy, but the survivors kept coming. Any rational beings would have turned tail and run, but not these Rhinos. They had to be killed to stop them from fighting as if possessed.

“Mechsuits, cease fire,” Straker barked when three-quarters of the enemy had been cut down. “Save your ammo. Cadre, fall back and let the Hok finish it.”

It didn't take long. The Rhino small arms, simple high-capacity slugthrowers, were no match for advanced armor.

Yet they had to be wiped out. They refused to surrender, or run.

"Resistance eliminated!" Major 24, in charge of the Hok company, reported.

Straker had given him that "Major 24" designation in honor of the original Major 24, the Hok who had led the contingent that had died to a man taking down the Crystal megaship. He had long since made his peace with using existing Hok. They might as well do something useful, and as long as they were Breakers, they wouldn't be abused. And maybe Mara would someday figure out a cure, some way to reverse their condition. Until then, they fought, just like any other Breakers.

He told himself these things to distract himself from the sickening carnage. "War is Hell," General William T. Sherman had said of Old Earth's First American Civil War.

He was right then, and he was right now.

Loco's comlink clicked in as the Guard resumed its advance across the rising hills. "These guys are psycho. Unarmored infantry charging against mechsuits?"

"Remember the briefings? It's their biotech."

"Almost makes you feel sorry for them."

"Yeah. Same old question. If someone's drunk or high or brainwashed or just plain crazy, how much is their fault?"

"Right. When Mara ranted in the briefing, I thought it was just the usual bleeding-heart doctor crap I get from Campos, but maybe she was right."

"Of course she was right—in the long run. In the short run... well, if a lunatic tries to kill you, whose fault it is doesn't matter much. You have to take him down." Straker grunted. "At least there's no question of genocide."

"Don't sweat it, Derek. The Rhino herd needs some thinning."

Straker lapsed into silence. He understood Loco's cavalier attitude, but he didn't have to enjoy the killing. He had seen people who came to like it, who had crossed that indefinable line from warrior to murderer—from human being to predatory animal.

He shook his head as if to throw off these thoughts and focused on the task ahead.

Overhead recon mapped the drone base and found no defenses stronger than a few bunkers with infantry. No reason to get fancy. “Battlesuits, dismount and support. Mechsuits, advance in line.”

They came over a hill to see the facility spread out below. Four drones were in the air and several more were spinning up. The HUD network SAIs deconflicted the fire of too many pilots trying to shoot too few targets, and four streams of gatlings knocked the air vehicles out of the sky.

After that, it was just mopping up. Aerospace forces on the surface were always meat for ground troops.

“This is too easy,” Loco said as they resumed their advance in First Battalion’s wake. “From the way the Salamanders talked, I thought the Rhinos would be harder targets.”

“We’re deep in their soft underbelly,” Straker replied. “They expected the same old enemy, not us—and we have all the advantages except numbers and time. We have orbit, we have freakishly scary combat machines, we have support from the rear, and we have tactical surprise. We’re like... armored space marines showing up on a medieval battlefield. We’re terrifying, and they have no idea how to handle us.”

“Not yet, anyway.”

“Yeah... Not yet.”

Chapter 17

Colonel Winter, Rhino continent, Premdor-2

Colonel Martin Winter let his mechsuit and his body do the work while his mind stayed on the battlefield. His HUD and SAI were struggling to keep pace, but they were losing their total situational awareness as First Battalion slashed deeper and deeper into enemy territory. The Breakers squadron was doing its best to cover them from high orbit, but by doing so—by firing beams and railgun bullets downward into the atmosphere, keeping the enemy off his back—they were blanketing the area with interference. He was reduced to what his own suits could see, hardly different from pre-tech Old Earth, when men used their Mark 1 Eyeballs.

Even so, he'd demolished three more Rhino combat formations without loss, using up two-thirds of his ammo and half his fuel in the process. Now, after five hundred kilometers of breakneck-speed blitzkrieg, First Battalion reached its first decision point: a civilian auxiliary airport. A small but clear paved spot on the terrain, it had the advantage of being undefended, deserted, and easy to find—even without orbital assistance. Terrain association and translation of Rhino signs led him right to it, on time.

Now to see if the vacuum jockeys could deliver on target.

He circled the airport and deployed his forces facing outward precisely one minute before the appointed time. Suit sensors showed nothing within twenty kilometers, but direct fire wasn't his worry.

The Rhinos' ballistic artillery had proven useless against mechsuits that would move a thousand meters between shot and fall. Mechsuits were equipped with Laser Aerospace Defense Artillery, or LADA, systems that could give warning and blind guided warheads. The Rhinos' hyper-missiles, however, were surprisingly good. Not terribly accurate, but terrifyingly fast, and launched in low, low trajectories that screamed over the treetops and provided little warning.

It was these that Colonel Winter worried about. As soon as the Rhinos figured out their enemies had stopped moving, he expected a storm of missiles to come calling.

Above, the Breaker warships would be dropping into low orbit, armored noses aimed straight downward, capacitors full, fusion reactors running above spec, crews and SAIs ready. They deliberately risked themselves

against the hundreds of missiles that leaped up at them in wave after wave, hundreds that added up to thousands over time. The Rhino continental stocks seemed inexhaustible.

Winter wished the Breaker fleet luck as they fired their own dumb weapons at maximum rate—beams and bullets, all replaceable. They'd have been more effective if they'd used up their own missiles, but they had to conserve those for contingencies.

Even so, they must've dropped at least one max-yield nuke in high atmo as his sensors whited out and EMP plucked at the fringes of his mechsuit's shielded systems. With luck, that would degrade the Rhinos for a while.

When the photonic overload cleared, his HUD showed a ring of interdiction fifty kilometers in radius around the airport. Railgun bullets from above met missiles and beams from below, while more beams probed from orbit... and in the center of it, four specially rigged armored landers fell.

Pilotless, of course. Even the hotshot flyboys weren't stupid enough to think they could lift off into that storm of fire, so these were expendable machines on a one-way trip.

They came in accelerating, upside-down until the last three thousand meters of altitude, when they flipped and fired their retros. A few missiles and beams reached out from enemy emplacements that had somehow escaped the suppressive fire, and one lander wobbled, tumbled, and augered into the pavement, leaving a crater a hundred meters across.

The other three made it down in blasts of fusion rocketry, slamming to the surface harder than living troops could have survived—but their cargo was rugged, deliberately designed for this kind of resupply mission.

"Go," Winter said. With that single word, the waiting squads of battlesuiters rushed in to the three surviving landers, which had already dropped their ramps, front and back.

Inside, the battlesuiters grabbed the coffin-like resupply modules and hustled them out in all directions like demented pallbearers. They dropped them in a rough circle inside the mechsuits' defensive perimeter just as the first of the expected missiles blazed low over the tree line to the north.

LADAs engaged with their blinding lasers, but the weapons were so fast, it hardly mattered. Their seeker eyes had no time to acquire targets anyway; in this nap-of-the-ground mode, they became unguided warheads. They'd hit or miss by dumb luck.

The battlesuits passed through the mechsuit circle and took covered positions farther out as the first two missiles impacted. One plowed up empty turf, while the other blew a maintenance shed to smithereens. Ignoring them, every second mechsuit hurried to a module and squatted atop it. Automated systems mated. Fuel isotopes and ammo flowed through ports into the mechsuits.

Three more rockets landed, one of them near directly atop a Ripper. The battlesuiter vanished in the explosion, shredded, the battalion's first casualty. The squad's other four Rippers rolled to their feet shaken but unhurt to take cover again.

As the first round of mechsuits topped off their stores, the second round moved into position—including Winter himself. A second nuke went off above, suppressing the missile fire for valuable minutes.

He wondered if—or when—the Rhinos would decide it was worth nuking their own territory in order to hurt First Battalion. From what he knew of the species and their crazy-making biotech, it shouldn't be too long. That was why this would be the only resupply.

It was also why he hadn't used his own small supply of tactical nukes. There was a logic to these things—a reluctance to be the first to escalate to wiping out whole areas, towns or cities with weapons of mass destruction. This was especially true in one's own back yard, but once one side did it odds were the floodgates would be opened.

While the Rhinos would pay a higher price, strictly speaking they could more afford to pay it than the Breakers.

The missiles were starting to fall once more as he sent the battlesuiters to recharge their own systems. They were last to top off because they were too small to carry fusion reactors. They only had capacitors, ultra-dense high-power storage batteries. Until now, they'd conserved their power by riding the mechsuits, but as soon as they had to fight, they'd need every joule.

"Phase Two, execute," Winter said calmly as soon as his HUD showed the last Ripper resupplied. "Good hunting, gentlemen."

He followed his own instructions, taking Golf and Hotel companies and heading toward the closest of the four target factories—the ones producing the poisonous chemical compound designated Tango.

His own goal was intentionally the closest, because his team included H Company, consisting of sixteen Sledgehammers. He'd discussed with

General Straker the idea of swapping the 70-ton heavies out for lighter, 50-ton Foehammers. They were a little slower in travel mode, a lot slower in sprint mode—but they were his heaviest guns, and he was loath to leave them behind. Besides, putting Sledgehammer pilots back in Foehammers would mean those particular people would be less accustomed to their machines.

No, better to accept a little loss of speed to avoid last-minute changes. Troops could put up with changes in mission, in deployment, even in commanders without batting an eyelash, but take away their familiar combat equipment and they became profoundly uneasy, almost superstitious.

They might ride machines, but they were still human. That was why Winter's target was closest, only about thirty-five kilometers away. The others, each in a different direction, ranged outward to about 110 kilometers' distance for the farthest, assigned to the two-company Alpha-Bravo team of Foehammers. Charlie-Delta, also Foehammers, got the next, while Echo-Foxtrot, consisting of heavier, slightly slower Jackhammers, got the next nearest.

The Foehammers were the lightest and fastest, yet they had the hardest task. Winter had decided to help them a little by carefully timing his attacks, drawing some fire away from them by hitting the closest targets first with his own team.

As he jogged along, he took a moment to check on the Liberator's Guard, which was securing his line of extraction.

* * *

Straker's HUD showed only scattered updates, but his parallel planning mode showed First Battalion should be resupplied by now and split into four two-company teams, each heading to its own Tango factory. He keyed his FTL comlink, avoiding the electromagnetic interference of the battle raging above his head. "Indy?"

"Here, General."

"SITREP on Winter?"

"I have no direct sensor data. Indirect indications from Rhino aim points and the extrapolated center of the running battle indicate successful resupply and Phase Two in progress. Our warships are coming out of their

low pass and will resume high geostationary orbit in order to avoid further damage.”

“What was the butcher’s bill for the fleet?”

“General degradation ranging from seven to thirteen percent. No crew deaths, a few radiation and heat injuries. Commodore Gray is being careful. Of course, we must expect more casualties if the ground forces need further help. The Rhino ADA shows no sign of slackening. In fact, it’s becoming more effective as they recall reserves and activate more units. They also learn about us as we learn about them.”

“Anything you can do?”

“We can de-orbit more mining asteroids, but to be effective, we have to aim them at targets the Rhinos value.”

“Cities, in other words? Calculate our odds of actually hitting the cities with the asteroids.”

“Five to ten percent of at least one piece of one asteroid destroying a city and inflicting at least one hundred thousand civilian casualties.”

Straker sighed. That meant he had a ninety percent chance of *not* murdering hundreds of thousands of innocent people... but if it happened, could he live with it?

On the other hand, what if the mission failed? There might be millions of Salamander deaths, not to mention turning their clients against the Breakers for not meeting their contract—which meant no pay and no home.

“This is why you wear the stars, Derek,” Straker muttered to himself.

“Okay, Indy, pass the word to Gray to de-orbit more asteroids. Do your best, but if the worst happens it’s my decision, my responsibility. Make that plain. The mission comes first.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

“And find me another target near our line of march. We need to divert as much pressure as possible from First Battalion.”

“There’s a strategic missile base about ninety kilometers to the east, if you’re willing to deviate that much.”

“Push the package to me.”

“Pushing now. Indy out.”

Straker’s FTL-datalink throughput capacity was far lower than that of an ordinary datalink, so it took nearly a minute for the package to buffer and appear in his HUD, even at low-res. It showed a hexagonally shaped

installation, with missile pits and retractable launchers arranged like flowers all around the central control bunker.

The Guard raced toward its target, snaking wide among towns and villages, each of which seemed to have militia willing to attack without hesitation or regard for their own lives. It became a matter of conserving power and ammunition—not bothering to shoot back but simply racing past.

The Rhinos as yet seemed unwilling to inflict collateral damage on their own civilians by dropping too much ordnance on the Guard, but Straker was well aware his movements were known to the enemy. As he crested a series of low hills to view the missile base, he ordered the battlesuits to dismount, and he remained extremely vigilant.

That vigilance may have saved his life. Before his SAI even identified the threat, Straker's instinct spotted the heavy launch rails aimed directly at him, depressed lower than he thought they could go.

"Cover!" he roared, and threw himself backward, curling into a ball and hoping to roll down the reverse slope of the hill.

The Rhino hypervelocity missiles were so fast he barely made it behind the crest before they tore chunks out of the hilltop, battering him with shockwaves and showering him with rocks and dirt. "Major 24, spread out to the flanks and scout," he ordered as he backed farther down into the hollow where he sheltered. "Cadre, can we get some gnats to take a look?"

"Roger wilco, sir," Cadre's commander replied. Seconds later, a pair of tiny short-range drones skimmed over the hill at an altitude of less than one meter. They were immediately blinded by LADA. "Their ADA is too good, sir. We need some suppression."

"Let's see what we can get. Indy, what can you give us to rattle these guys' cages?"

"Another low pass from our warships will cost in damage, but it can be done. I advise against it, though. In my assessment, your target is not important enough to pay that cost."

"What about our ground force perimeter?"

"I remind you that you decided not to deploy the divisional heavy artillery battalion, in favor of lighter, more mobile forces. I can relay a call for fire from the missile tracks available, but most of the warheads will be intercepted."

“How good is the Rhino target-discrimination system? Is it smart enough to accurately choose the highest-threat ordnance?”

“Substandard. They seem to be shooting down anything in the air, based on proximity and size rather than effectiveness.”

“So larger and closer things get priority?”

“Generally, yes.”

Straker mulled this over, an idea forming. “All right. Can our heavy tanks lob dumb shells this far?”

“At maximum turret elevation? Barely...”

“All right. Here’s the plan...”

Five minutes later, he was ready, with the Guard spread out well back from the missile base, in a semicircle to the south: 34 mechsuits and 160 battlesuits standing by.

“Initiate,” he told Indy.

“Shot, over,” she replied, indicating the indirect fire was on its way—shells from the heavy tanks, with their railguns elevated to maximum, followed by guided missiles from the brigade’s medium crawler tracks. The missiles would be programmed and timed to closely follow the shells at the point of impact.

A short wait.

“Five seconds,” Indy reported.

Straker counted to three. “Guard, throw!”

Every suit, whether mech or battle, launched rocks and boulders toward the missile base—the old-fashioned way, like cavemen, with their powered arms and gauntlets. Some threw one-handed, some two, but each rapid-fired chunks of stone over the crests of the hills to add hundreds more airborne targets to the enemy’s sensor screens.

Above them in the night sky, flashes of explosions crawled up from the south like fireworks, approaching the missile base with the flight of the ordnance. Each small burst represented an interception, but with the heavy tank shells and the rocks running interference for the Breaker missiles, it looked like some would get through.

The Cadre sent two more gnats over the hill. This time, they survived to provide targeting data to the mechsuit SAI network. 34 HUDs displayed 34 specific targets for antitank missiles.

“Antitank volley, make ready, ultra-low profile,” Straker barked. While the battlesuiters continued to throw their rocks over the hills, mechsuit

pilots confirmed their targets, leaning over to place their gauntlets on their knees. “Two rounds each. Fire!”

From concealed bays between their shoulders, a volley of antitank missiles sprung into the air and darted along the ground, skimming just above the crests of the hills toward the Rhino missile base. One exploded as its computer misjudged its route and struck some obstacle. Four others were blinded by enemy LADA, but the rest slammed into their targets, the Rhino missile launchers.

Another volley followed, updated by the gnats, searching out undamaged targets.

It was an expensive tactic, to fire off hundreds of shells and dozens of missiles from the rear merely to saturate the defenses, but it had worked. The gnats showed all of the enemy launchers pointing toward the Guard had been destroyed.

“Advance in line,” Straker said, forcing himself to be calm as he strode forward. “Choose your targets. Conserve your ammo and power. Battlesuits, keep your eyes open and let the mechsuits do the damage.”

The line of Foehammers surmounted their hills and walked downward, with Straker and Loco at the extreme left and right flanks keeping an eye out for surprises. Straker tempered his urge to shoot something by reminding himself he was the commander. His responsibility was to watch the whole situation, not to have fun.

This time it didn’t matter. The launchers aimed the Guard’s way lay in ruins. Huge accelerators fifty meters long and set permanently in the ground, but facing elsewhere, were swinging laboriously in their direction. They were far too slow and too late. The Foehammers simply targeted the missiles waiting on the rails and blew them up, letting the secondary explosions of the warheads destroy the launchers themselves.

Small ground-defense emplacements—slugthrower and laser nests—fell quickly to battlesuit blasters and Foehammer gatling bursts. The Guard split left and right to roll them up in both directions around the perimeter. They left the central control bunker alone. It was too heavily armored, not worth the power and ammo it would take to batter through it.

“Cadre, Hok, spread out and maintain security. Pilots, put a force-cannon shot down each launcher silo,” Straker ordered, “then we extract along a bearing of zero-five-one to Waypoint Delta. Make it fast.”

Although the external launchers were destroyed, the silos that reloaded them from the underground magazines remained largely intact. The best he could do at short notice was to damage or seal the reloading tubes, putting them out of action for several days.

As the Breakers finished mopping up, the doors to the central bunker opened. Twenty or thirty Rhinos with nothing but sidearms charged into the open, shooting wildly. Straker's Hok instantly cut them down with precision blaster fire.

Pathetic, he thought. Were they brave, deluded, or were they so terrified of failing their leaders they were willing to commit suicide by combat? Or was it just the biotech making them into raving animals?

The whole situation made him sick. This kind of war—one enormous biological error twenty years ago, its consequences echoing down through time—was a pitiable waste.

Straker felt much better once the Guard was back on its way. The Rhinos were still holding off on dropping nukes, but that might change at any time.

It particularly might change if Colonel Winter used his own nukes.

Chapter 18

Premdor-2

Colonel Winter expected resistance at the mountain pass. According to his map the road climbed the mountainside to over 3000 meters altitude before descending through a narrow valley and debouching to the sheltered chemical factory below. His two-company combat team was going to have to slug its way through.

The dense overcast common to this planet and season made the night even darker, but to the sophisticated sensors in the suits it might as well be day. It was one more reason to attack at night, as the Rhino sensors weren't as advanced. Winter's HUD showed heat, faint light, and activity at the pass.

"Battlesuits forward to scout," he ordered.

The Rippers dismounted and spread out, loping up the mountainside like wolverines. Unlike an armored vehicle, tracked or wheeled or hover, battlesuits cared little for slopes. Powered armor and jump jets allowed them to cross the roughest terrain without regard to roads or chokepoints... as the Rhinos would soon find out.

Mechsuits were a little more limited because of their weight and size. Where a battlesuit could scramble up a scree slope or race across shifting soil, a mechsuit might slip, slide and cause an avalanche. In this steep area, the road would be his best route, so the battlesuits would have to clear the way.

"Hotel Company, secure your own perimeter," he ordered. "Advance slowly, maintaining covering fire. Use your particle beams."

The Sledgehammers spread out and rotated their upper bodies, twisting in directions impossible to a human being. The pilots within, of course, remained comfortable. This odd disconnect between body and suit was alien to the human mind, and took special practice. Because of that, Sledgehammer pilots considered themselves a breed apart, individuals with special skills.

The first Sledgehammer fired a charged particle beam up the mountainside, aimed precisely at the lip of the pass. The beam superheated and ionized the ground, causing a blast indistinguishable from a true

explosion. The blast also caused an EMP surge at the point of impact, which should disrupt electronics nearby.

As Winter jogged his Jackhammer up the road along with the rest of Golf Company, the battlesuits flanked left and right, climbing to positions overlooking the pass. Their sensors relayed data to the network, and Winter's HUD showed him a company-sized element of light armor in the process of digging in, hoping to hold or slow down the Breakers.

Not likely.

"We can take them, sir," First Sergeant Goulard said. He was Winter's most senior battlesuiter. "I don't think they know we're here above them."

Another blast from a particle beam punctuated the night, but it hit nothing.

"Roger that. You are go in ten seconds. H Company, cease-fire and advance to support."

Ten seconds later, the pass erupted with fire from the hillsides above the saddle. By the time Winter reached the summit, the battlesuiters had disabled or destroyed all the armored vehicles by attacking their lightly armored tops.

"Had to kill all their crews," Goulard told him as he bounced over to stand beside Winter's Jackhammer. "They're crazy, juiced on stims or something, charging us with sidearms and even blades." He kicked a knife out of the hand of one of the dead Rhinos.

"They're overpopulated with young males, Top. Their leaders don't care about casualties. We don't have that luxury." To emphasize his words, he stepped on an armored personnel carrier and crushed it like a beer can with his sixty tons. "We lose anyone?"

"Private Coyle got his dick-hand blown off because he was fucking around with a tank cannon, trying to show off, but he can still hold a blaster. The biotech's got it under control, but I'm sure it hurts like a bitch. Serves him right as far as I'm concerned, sir."

Winter chuckled. "Let's hope that's all the hurt we take. Mount up."

Their advance down the steep twisting valley was eerily lacking in resistance, and Winter increase speed now that the target was less than ten kilometers away. When they approached the last steep hillside, he sent battlesuits up and over. They showed nothing in the way, and a well-lit industrial target laid out on the valley floor.

"Almost too easy," he muttered. "Too big, too bright."

He commanded his HUD to filter out the factory illumination and search for anomalies around and beyond it.

Ah-ha. On the other side of the factory a line of tanker trucks snaked away, hurrying northward. At the same time, a few lightweight autocannon fired tracer rounds toward his troops with no great accuracy.

Tracers? More distractions, buying time.

Winter pushed his annotated HUD picture to all suits. “They’re getting away with the Tango, heading for the weaponization depot,” he said. “Hotel Company and battlesuits, dismantle this factory complex, minimum power and ammo expenditure. Remember, we still have to make it home. Golf Company, we’re going after those tanker trucks.” He switched to his FTL comlink. “Indy, pass the word to my other companies: expect the Rhinos to be bugging out with the goods at each factory.”

“Aye aye, Colonel.”

Ignoring fuel concerns, Winter charged to his left, skirting the Tango factory while running flat-out like a footballer accelerating for a tackle. The sixteen Jackhammers of Golf Company followed him—the best combination of speed and punch in the battalion.

Would the Rhinos have enough armor for an escort for the tanker trucks? If he were the enemy commander, he’d have sent off each tanker as it filled, trusting to speed and dispersion to get the vital Tango chemical away. Instead, this looked like a convoy—which would imply some kind of guarding force.

There. Between the trucks and him he could see at least twenty heavy tanks, their thick guns aimed his way as they traveled in reverse, a rearguard.

“Flank them!” he barked as the first enemy fired. The round blazed through the space he occupied half a second before. He turned his predictive dodge leftward into a shoulder roll, firing his right-arm force-cannon unerringly at the offending tank. The bolt of plasma wrecked the enemy’s gun, but apparently didn’t penetrate the glacis, as the autocannon turret above and behind continued firing.

Winter rolled to his feet, accelerating to high speed as he flanked left. Around him the night erupted with deadly energies, force-cannon bolts dueling with tank shells. A glancing blow from one knocked him to the dirt, and he remained down while scrambling into a drainage canal. His HUD

told him he now had a weak spot under his arm, but otherwise all systems remained intact.

He jogged along the canal floor in order to break any locks the enemy might have on him. Gold Company was dealing with the heavy tanks. He had to get beyond the escort and make sure the tankers didn't get away.

Skirting the battle, he raced ahead, parallel with the highway that carried the trucks. Their drivers clearly knew the hounds of hell were at their heels, for they were rolling fast and getting faster, pushing their machines well beyond sensible safety limits. The lead tanker must be hitting 160 KPH.

Just as he lifted his gauntlet to put a gatling burst into the tanker from long range, his HUD lit up with bogies above the surface. Combat drones, at least a dozen.

His LADA immediately engaged with blinding lasers and cued him with targeting reticles. Training took over—mechsuiters were drilled in the art of instant response to threat—and both his gatlings blazed out with short bursts, taking down the drones with machinelike precision.

At the same time, the drones fired at him—more hypervelocity missiles. He spun rightward to evade the volley, but three struck him. One destroyed his lightly armored LADA cluster, where the head of a man would be. The other two smashed into his torso, knocking his armor density down by more than fifty percent. He couldn't take much more of that kind of pounding.

The drones, though now all destroyed, had done their job in delaying him. The lead tanker truck disappeared over a rise in the roadway several kilometers away...but the second truck was still just in range. He lined up both arms and triggered his gatlings.

The stream of penetrators, foreshortened by perspective, seemed to float toward their target like a swarm of bees before touching it lightly, a caress of crysteel that shattered the vehicle and ignited its hydrogen fuel. He shifted fire to the next truck in line, and the next, each closer target becoming meat for his grinder.

The tankers slewed left and right, running off the blocked roadway, still attempting to get away, but Winter pushed to closed the range, making sure of his kills. It only took five or six rounds to shatter each container and spill the liquid gushing over the roadway and onto the verge.

Pity it isn't flammable, he thought.

His gatling ammo dropped below fifty percent, so he finished off the trucks with force-cannon bolts and returned to the Tango plant. Golf Company had mopped up the heavy tanks and were now methodically demolishing the facility. Winter took the opportunity to check on his other combat teams.

His HUD gave him minimal info. The usual high-quality datalinks were absent, and the FTL datalink, relayed through Indy, provided only a bare-bones picture. It showed the next closest team, Echo and Foxtrot companies, assaulting their target, a chemical plant on the shores of a long lake about 70 kilometers from his position.

Charlie-Delta was on approach to their target, and Alpha-Bravo, on route to the most distant Tango factory, was still forty kilometers away from it.

Winter's plan had been to strike the closest factory—his own—first, drawing the reaction toward himself and thinning out the response against his most vulnerable strike team, Alpha-Bravo. He hadn't expected the Rhinos to get the Tango loaded up and moving so fast. In fact, he had no info about the other Tango plants, but he had to assume they were also getting convoys moving—well before two of his teams could reach them.

And he couldn't imagine trying to fight onward, another hundred kilometers or more, to attack a heavily defended complex, and then to extract under fire. The Rhinos were getting over their surprise. The missiles were already falling heavier on his units. Every Rhino ground formation on the continent would be mobilizing—and soon, too soon, the night would end, and with it much of the Breakers' tech advantage.

Some Tango would get through. There was no way he could order his troops to continue. His rough sims told him he'd lose half his people if he tried.

That meant the mission had failed, at least partially.

Unless he escalated.

His mouth went dry. He had no choice. "Indy, put me through to General Straker."

* * *

"Straker here," he said to Indy's comlink relay from Colonel Winter.

“Winter here, sir. One plant down, one more being destroyed, but they loaded a lot of Tango onto tanker trucks, so I have to believe they’ll get about half of their current production to the weaponization plant.”

“How many tankers of what size?”

“The convoy we destroyed had about one million liters, estimated fifty thousand per tanker, and one got away—but I doubt we’ll be able to intercept much more Tango. So, at a guess, they’ll have more than two million liters to process.”

“Indy?”

“That will allow them to make approximately twenty percent of what the Eprem feared,” Indy said.

“My sims say I’ll lose half my troops if we continue the attack conventionally,” Winter said. “The Rhino resistance curve is too steep. We have to go nuclear.”

Straker had already made his decision. “I agree.”

“I suggest we consult our clients, if we can get a quick answer,” Indy said.

“Do it,” Straker said. The contract gave the final decision to the Salamanders. “A quick answer!”

Four minutes crawled by while Straker jogged along his route of march with the Guard, still extending deeper into enemy territory, anticipating Winter’s withdrawal.

Then Indy comlinked. “The Eprem have authorized nuclear employment.”

“Creator help us all,” Straker replied with a touch of fatalistic bitterness. “The Rhinos will get the worst of it, but they don’t seem to care much. We knew this might happen, and we have to complete the mission. Indy, pass the warning to all units: nuclear battle protocols. Colonel Winter, you have nuclear release at your discretion.”

“Roger, sir. Hope it’s worth it.”

“You and me both, Martin. Good luck, and good hunting.”

“Thank you, sir. Winter out.”

Straker keyed for the Guard channel. “Listen up. We’re going nuclear. The Rhinos might do the same, so nuke protocols are now in effect. Battlesuits will dismount. Max dispersion, keep up your speed, keep your eyes open for bolt-holes. Duck and cover on warning.”

Following his own orders, Straker raced for the left-side point position, comlinking on the way. “Loco, you take right-point. We’ll lead the way.”

“Roger wilco, boss.”

“Shift line of march ten degrees east. We’ll keep changing course every few clicks.”

“Got it. I’ll key off you.” Taking point wasn’t as dangerous as it might seem. The risk of running into a surprise was counterbalanced by their distance from the center of the unit—which would usually be the target of any deliberate nuke. Also, if there were an ambush, it was standard practice to let the point go by and engage the main body.

“Indy, do you have any comms at all with the enemy?” Straker said.

“They’ve never responded to any of our attempts to speak with them.”

“Then we’ll have to communicate in sign language.”

“Sir?”

“Pass to Commodore Gray. Soft-launch all our shipkiller missiles. Every single one. I want a thousand nukes in high orbit hanging above the Rhinos’ heads.”

“We only have 252 nuclear warheads, and many would be intercepted.”

“But they don’t know that. Put the missiles into profiles to hit their major cities, their capital, their command centers, everything, and make it look like our ships are getting ready to do another low pass. I want the Rhinos to believe we can depopulate their continent if we want to,” Straker said.

“A general nuclear exchange will result in them striking the Eprem as well. They will suspect a bluff—that our clients won’t be willing to risk mutually assured devastation.”

“They have to know the chemical weapons represent catastrophe for the Salamanders. The Salamanders have nothing to lose. And, it’s one thing for the Rhinos to *think* themselves willing to die for their goals. It’s another for their leaders to actually stare down the barrel of the gun.”

“Understood.” Indy paused. “Colonel Winter has asked me to pass the nuclear strike order to his combat team closest to the weaponization plant. They will launch in approximately nineteen minutes. I’ve initiated de-orbiting of another asteroid, targeted on the plant. The Rhinos will probably destroy it and its debris, but it’ll keep them occupied.”

Straker’s sigh was audible over the sound of his moving mechsuit. “It all comes down to this—what will the Rhinos do?”

“Historically, that’s always been the question with potential nuclear exchanges on a planet’s surface—with any weapons of mass destruction. How does anyone employ nuclear force without initiating mutual suicide? Old Earth managed to avoid destroying itself, but there have been other planets that were not so fortunate.”

“Let’s hope we don’t add Premdor to the list. Straker out.” He switched to the Guard channel. “Course change, ten degrees west.” His body and brainlinked mechsuit moved without conscious thought, as a civilian might automatically drive a groundcar while pondering something else entirely.

Was he crazy for leading the Breakers into this situation? It had all seemed so rational, step by step, with the best of intentions—which paved the road to Hell, according to the saying. He’d authorized laying a nuclear weapon onto a living planet’s surface, a taboo as old as Einstein, made more horrible because of its occasional violation.

And while it was the will of the Salamanders—his clients, his lawful paymasters, to whom he had a mercenary’s loyalty—he still wondered whether he was doing the right thing.

Perhaps the least-wrong thing.

When he was a kid, even when he was a young man growing into his role as Liberator, he’d truly believed he’d always stick to his principles—that every choice had one proper, moral answer. Make the right choice and damn the consequences.

Now, things were murkier. His first responsibility was to the Breakers, which led him to fight for the Salamanders, whose cause was righteous: self-defense against a genocidal enemy. So far, so good. But, to save the Salamanders, he might be lighting a powder keg that would destroy both sides, and the best of the Breakers in the process.

Yes, the Breakers could go on without him and the suit battalions, but was the risk worth it?

He could see no other choice, despite his doubts.

“Indy?” he said.

“Yes, General?”

Straker stopped talking, and the silence stretched.

In the night sky to the north, a tremendous fireball descended toward the ground as if in slow motion. The de-orbiting asteroid. Streaks reached up from the ground to tear it apart. It grew brighter as it shattered and scattered. Time itself seemed to freeze for a long, gelatinous moment.

“Nothing,” he eventually said, breaking the spell as the nineteen minutes elapsed. No more time to think, or to abort.

“Combat team Alpha-Bravo has launched missiles in nap-of-the-ground mode. Two will be nuclear. Ground-zero range to your position is 241 kilometers.”

“Broadcast our reasoning to the Rhinos, in their language. That the Salamanders were facing annihilation. That their backs were to the wall. And with the destruction of their weaponization plant, the scales are balanced again. They have a chance to step back from the brink.”

“I doubt they’ll listen.”

“We’re not saying it for them, really. We’re saying it for ourselves and our own consciences. That we gave them every chance.”

“Understood, General.” A pause. “Detonation in five, four, three, two, one. Mark.”

The far-off flash turned the night to day, reflecting off the overcast beyond the horizon. Seconds later, the top of the glowing mushroom cloud climbed into view.

“Engagement successful. Weaponization complex destroyed. Seismic shockwave will arrive in approximately eighty seconds. Atmospheric shockwave will arrive in approximately fifteen minutes.”

“We’ve rung the doorbell on the gates of Hell. Let’s see if the Rhinos open them. Pass the word for Winter to extract. We’re moving to support.”

“Already done, General. Remember, your suits have not been refueled.”

“We’re fine at about seventy percent, Indy.”

“If you drop below fifty percent and are still moving northward, you risk passing bingo fuel and depletion before you can reach the coast. Further resupply drop is not available.”

“Fine. Keep reminding me.”

“And I’ll also remind you, not only can we not afford to lose you or the Guard personnel, but the mechsuits are irreplaceable in the short term.”

“I got it.”

On his HUD, he watched Winter’s four groups heading roughly southward, changing their courses every minute or two, running flat-out, approaching 200 KPH at times. They chose terrain that might give them partial shielding against a nuclear blast in a pinch.

The Guard moved generally toward the center of Winter’s formation. They encountered two separate battalions of light armor—one tracked, one

of hovers—which they quickly destroyed, losing two Hok battlesuiters in the process.

Nearly a bloodless victory so far, Straker mused, and then cursed himself for tempting fate with the thought, even as Indy crackled in his ear.

“Colonel Winter reports enemy nuclear attack.”

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Chapter 19

Straker, Premdor-2 battlefield

“How bad is it?” Straker asked as Indy reported the Rhinos had started using nukes. He searched the horizon to the north for flashes as he continued to move, traversing his aiming reticle restlessly along his frontage.

“Tactical size, point-five kiloton yield, battlefield use only so far. No megaton blasts, nothing aimed at Salamander cities—or the beachhead.”

Straker blew out his breath with relief. “They’ve called our bet, but not raised. Casualties?”

“Four mechsuits, twenty battlesuits so far. With that weapon size and the current dispersion protocols, mechsuits will usually survive anything but a direct hit. They seem to be using nukes sparingly and discriminately so far.”

“Interesting. Maybe their leaders aren’t as juiced-up on the biotech as the common Rhino.”

“Or perhaps they have an improved version for themselves, and find it advantageous to use the debased version on the populace.”

“Makes them easier to lead around by their emotions, easier to send the poor suckers into battle to die for a stupid cause, eh?”

“History repeats itself. General, I’m detecting a strong formation of armored vehicles intruding from the east, between the Guard and First Battalion. Division strength. Rate of travel, approximately 50 KPH.” Straker’s HUD flashed with an arrow about two hundred kilometers north and forty kilometers east of his position. The arrow pointed westward, its direction of travel.

“Division strength, huh? Now I see what we’ve had such an easy time of it. They were assembling a big force.” He checked his chrono. They’d fought nearly all night. 0400 local, with dawn slated for 0512. “I think they’re timing it for daybreak, and they’re placing themselves squarely across First Bat’s route of withdrawal.”

“There’s another full armored division heading in from the west, to arrive about an hour later. I’m also detecting many smaller troop movements from all over, heading toward this area.”

“In other words, now the whole continent’s mobilized against us. They’ll try to swamp us with numbers, knowing we’re deep in their territory.” He examined his HUD, with its sketchy info. “Pass to the rest of the brigade to extend their salient northward from the wetlands. Attack and disrupt anything they can. Try to draw some attention away from us without sacrificing themselves.”

“Should I pass the other battalions authorization to use tactical nuclear weapons?”

“What did the Salamanders say?”

“Their exact wording is permissive, though I suspect from the nuance and context they didn’t intend for us to use nuclear weapons on anything except the enemy chemical plants.”

“If we start using them on Rhino units, we might get countermanded right away...and if we do that, and suddenly need to use them to save ourselves, we might be in violation of our contract. So, no, let’s not ask the question. We might not like the answer. Save our option and our apology for if we really need it.”

“Understood.”

At that moment, Straker’s HUD fuzzed and his optic nerves ached with sudden maximum input as the area around him whited out. The ground leaped under his feet as if turned to rubber. He found himself thrown three meters in the air, tumbling. He rolled with the shockwave as he hit the ground. The battlesuit squad riding his shoulders blew off and took cover as soon as they regained control.

His HUD flashed an alert. The terrain outside now showed high levels of radiation. He was fine inside his suit, of course, but anyone outside and unprotected had taken a lethal dose.

As his suit rebooted systems and recovered from the EMP of the blast, Straker turned in a circle until he spotted the mushroom cloud rising nearby, its glowing red top still roiling with superheated ionized gas and climbing like a maddened rocket. He mentally matched ground zero with the last known positions of Guard suits, and told his HUD to perform a roll call.

One mechsuit didn’t report in—sergeant Vanbeek—along with five Hok. Vanbeek’s transponder didn’t reply, and the data record showed he’d been near ground zero. The incoming missile had been blinded by suit LADA, but nukes didn’t need precision terminal guidance. They only needed to detonate in the general area.

Straker ordered the Hok leader, “Major 24, take two squads and do a sweep of ground zero—a fast sweep. See if any of our people survived. Stay dispersed. They might hit us with another nuke.”

“Roger wilco, sir!”

The sweep showed nothing, no further blasts came, and Straker kept the Guard moving. Was that nuke a warning? A test to see the effect of atomic weaponry on Breakers? A proportional response for political reasons? Were they short of tactical nukes?

Fortunately, it was a very small nuke. They were probably limiting the damage to their own territory... and they were probably overestimating the effect on a mechsuit formation.

An hour later, the Guard had easily destroyed several weak formations of enemy troops, yet every one-sided battle drained their fuel, the fusion isotopes that powered the mechsuits’s reactors. Every fight also used up their ammo—the gatling wire that formed bullets, and the bimetallic wafers that created the plasma in their force-cannon bolts.

“Any chance of a resupply?” Straker asked Indy.

“We’ve assembled another lander squadron filled with all our remaining resupply modules, but the simulations predict fifty percent will be lost in the drop, and we’ll be left without modules or the means to manufacture anymore.”

“Plan to do it. Better to lose modules than people and suits. Five-meter targets.”

“If we drop, they will simply nuke the drop site, now that the nuclear threshold has been breached. The modules will be destroyed.”

“Dammit. We should’ve resupplied first.” Straker considered. “Prep it as a contingency option anyway.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

Straker checked on the three conventional battalions behind him. They’d extended a long salient over 100 kilometers from the wetlands like a finger on the map pointing northward at the battle area. Then came a gap of about 400 kilometers to the Guard’s location. North of that by 50 kilometers were icons representing powerful Rhino formations, and even farther northward the four First Bat combat teams converged, trying to re-form into a coherent battalion.

The Rhinos obviously hoped the Breakers would try to punch right through from both sides, so Straker resolved to go around. The east side

was the obvious route, as it avoided the Rhino reinforcements driving in from the west.

The obvious route...

“Loco?” Straker said.

“Here, boss.”

“Does the enemy left flank—toward our right, the east side—look a little weak to you?”

“Yeah, very weak.”

“Do we think the Rhinos are stupid?”

“Not particularly. They’re competent enough fighters. Not at our level, and their tech is lower, but I haven’t seen them make any bad tactical mistakes.”

“So why is the east side so weak, and the west side so strong?”

Loco seemed to ponder. “You think they want us to go there?”

“Let’s say they do. Why?”

“The best escape route is a nice river valley, north to south. First Battalion slides to their left, we slide to our right, we enter the valley from top and bottom, we cover each other and link up, then extract southward easy-peasy, with a nice ridge as cover. So if I were them...”

“Go on...”

“I’d nuke the shit out of that valley. Set up a kill zone, maybe have some entrenched and hidden forces just over the ridges for after the nukes gut us. A whole Rhino division just passed through that area, so they could’ve emplaced ambushers, buried some nuke mines... Yeah, boss, that’s bad juju.”

“So what’s our next-best option?” Straker asked.

“Hmm... straight up the middle means we only fight the one division, if we do it fast and hard, and they’re not gonna nuke too close to their own guys, so as soon as we get in among them that’s one less thing to worry about. Or, we head far west and try to make an end-run around their second division, but we’re short on fuel.”

“What about even farther east?”

“There’s a whole series of valleys there. How far over do we have to go before we’re sure they haven’t emplaced nuke mines? We’d be using up fuel all the time.”

“Right.”

“But boss... if they’re gonna keep nuking us, we can nuke them, right?”

“Yes, at least in the short term. As soon as we do, though, the Salamanders might order us to cease and desist with the nukes—so we only have one volley for sure.”

Loco cleared his throat, the sound coming through clearly on the comlink. “Seems like we got two choices: the tempting ‘easy’ way where we’ll have to resupply for sure, and we might get nuked—or the hard, sure way where we nuke them first, then hammer through. What’s it gonna be?”

“Stand by.” Straker’s one eye on the HUD told him he had about five minutes to make a decision. He wasn’t afraid of taking responsibility for the choice, but he liked to have all the facts. “Indy?”

“General?”

“Run sims between the two scenarios Loco and I just discussed.”

“I’ve run sims on all possible scenarios.”

“So by the numbers, what’s my top two COAs?”

“The best two courses of action, assuming no additional surprises, are as follows: either employ a volley of tactical nuclear weapons against the nearest Rhino division and then punch through, or race eastward to link up in the fourth-nearest river valley to the east, which may or may not be clear of ambushers. The first option yields the best and smoothest cost-benefit bell curve. The second option displays an inverted bell curve.”

“Meaning in plain Earthan...” Straker said.

“Feast or famine. Great success or great disaster. The first option will likely result in 81% survival, plus or minus 7% percent. The second option will likely result in either 98% survival or 17% survival in roughly equal probabilities, depending on whether the fourth valley is mined.”

“So a hard, sure thing—or a coin flip.”

“Yes.”

“The hard way it is. And, I think we’ll improve on your percentages, because the Rhinos won’t be expecting it. Pass to Colonel Winter what we’re doing. At exactly 0509 hours local, he’s to launch all his remaining tac nukes from the north, targets at his discretion. Add in a spread of standard missiles and volley direct fire to cover the nukes, everything nap-of-the-ground. The Guard will do the same from the south. Punch through in the atomic chaos, meet in the middle, and extract southward. Don’t conserve ammo, because as soon as First Bat’s through, we’re all hauling ass southward as fast as our legs will carry us. Got it?”

“Of course, General. I’ve passed him your orders, and I’ll ensure all company commanders also receive them. Will there be anything else?”

“Yeah, Indy. *Thank you*. I can’t imagine fighting without you in my ear anymore. You’re the perfect battle coordinator.”

“You’re welcome, General... though to be fair, that’s what Vic was supposed to be.”

“You still miss him.”

“Always. But I won’t let that degrade my efficiency. Good luck and good hunting, General. The time is 0508 hours and thirty seconds... Mark. Indy out.”

Straker brought his attention back into the battle, issuing orders on the short-range comlink to Loco and the two mechsuit company commanders. Each of those four people had one tactical nuke, and Straker marked the center mass of four enemy battalions in front of him.

When the chrono ticked down to the mark, every mechsuit in the Guard launched two of its three missiles, so instead of only four—the nukes—there were more than seventy targets for the enemy to track and try to shoot down.

As soon as they launched, the mechsuits fired their force-cannons at extreme range, aiming at Rhino targets but not expecting actual effect—beyond throwing a lot of plasma, electromagnetic pulse, smoke and dirt into the air. A few hundred gatling bullets, plus blaster shots from the battlesuits, joined the mess, all designed to make it difficult for the enemy LADA to intercept the missiles.

“Guard, take cover,” Straker ordered five seconds before the Breaker nukes were due to detonate among the enemy. He and everyone around him threw themselves flat and hugged the ground.

The EMP and thermal shock arrived first, his shielded electronics beeping to report its impact and that all was well. The ground shock came immediately after and bounced him like a trampoline while doing no damage, but that was expected. The airborne shockwave then washed over him, carrying a storm of flash-ignited debris, ash, rocks like bullets and dust—turning the dim dawn sky temporarily black again.

“Up and at ’em!” Straker roared as he leaped to his feet, allowing his strides to lengthen and his bounces to go a little higher. The enemy would be shocked for a few moments, their targeting badly degraded, and he needed to get among the Rhinos *now* and do what mechsuits did best.

Close assault, at knife-fight range.

He waited until he'd passed the enemy formation's surprised front line before firing, putting one force-cannon bolt into the vulnerable side of a heavy tank. With two force-cannons in his Jackhammer, one on each arm, he tried to keep one in reserve while the other recharged.

This allowed him to fire defensively, or at targets of opportunity, a rolling barrage that ensured he was seldom without a shot, like a two-fisted gunman. The Jackhammer was so much handier than the older Foehammer, a true mechsuirer's weapon.

But it used up fuel and ammo faster...

Straker's HUD told him the rest of the Guard was following in two diamonds, one behind him, one behind Loco on the right flank. Like the tips of two spears, the formations cut and penetrated deep into the enemy brigade that faced them—thirty-three mechsuits and over one hundred battlesuits fought more than 200 enemy armored vehicles, about half of them heavy tanks.

If the Rhinos had been Hok, deployed by the old Mutuality, it might've been an even fight. But, stunned by the opening nuke strike and equipped with inferior equipment, without the perfected training and discipline of the Hok, what initially looked like a contest turned into a slaughter.

The Rhino heavies that could've been so deadly turned out to be almost useless against mechsuits, as their non-turreted, forward-facing guns couldn't track the mechsuits rampaging among them.

Their turreted autocannon proved much more dangerous to the battlesuits bouncing here and there like biting fleas, so Straker prioritized hitting those heavies with crews that seemed to be fighting well. Tanks that were fleeing or seemed confused he left alone, slamming bolts of white-hot plasma into the sides and rear of those that were still in the fight.

He might have thought the Breaker battlesuits a hindrance rather than a help if it wasn't for the enemy infantry. Unlike the Rhino militia, these were obviously professionals. They'd used their few minutes available before the attack to dig in. Their fighting vehicles even had earthmoving blades, a clever addition.

As individuals, the infantry didn't have much effect, but as a mass of thousands, dropped in squads from their vehicles, they were like swarms of biting ants. They fired their lasers, blasters, crew-served autocannon and light antitank rockets from foxholes, from behind low walls and from inside

scattered farmhouses, from concrete-lined irrigation ditches and from their vehicles themselves.

Added all together, this Rhino firepower could've chewed up and taken down even mechsuits... without the battlesuits. Now, the powered armor came into its own as Hok and Cadre roamed the battlefield in hunter-killer teams, blasting the enemy infantry at close range or launching grenades unerringly into foxholes.

The Rhino regulars fought well, very well, but they faced the elite of the Breakers, highly trained and experienced veterans of many battles, men and women so expert, so cool and comfortable in the chaos that they might have been simply playing a VR combat game.

Consummate professionals, none of the Breakers wavered, and they made few mistakes.

Unfortunately, none of the Rhino infantry surrendered. They seemed completely fanatical, unlike the vehicle crews, who appeared capable of fear. The Breaker battlesuiters had to hunt all the infantry down and execute each and every one of the infantry, or they kept firing.

Straker's rising respect for the enemy soldiers plummeted as he realized this wasn't courage or dedicated defense of their homeland against invaders—it was programmed insanity. The infantry were obviously given the most crazy-making version of the biotech. They might as well be Hok.

Tyranny always seem to head down the same road, he thought to himself. He used the Hok troops he had because the alternative was worse—to euthanize them or employ them as work slaves—but he would never create any more. It was immoral.

But given the opportunity, the Rhino leaders had taken their own young men and made their own Hok—soulless cannon fodder, things to be used, and used up.

It made him feel better about this war and his part in it. It reminded him of a soldier's purpose: to defend the weak and the innocent and to right a few wrongs if lucky.

Within five minutes, Straker's vehicle kill-count topped twenty and the enemy armor was in full retreat. A check of his HUD showed several mechsuits damaged, but none destroyed and no pilots lost. One was crippled and without mobility—the pilot had to dismount.

Fortunately, Straker had mandated wear of battlesuits within the mechsuits. The pilots disliked this double-layer—it added weight and

inhibited movement by a few percent—but it dramatically improved survivability. The pilot in question would be blessing him now as he leaped aboard a handy mechsuit for a ride across the radioactive battlefield.

Straker checked his suit status. His LADA was destroyed, and his armor showed a patchwork of damage ranging from four percent to over eighty percent in a few spots. The self-repair nanotech embedded in the armor was in high gear, reconstructing the superconducting duralloy molecule by molecule, but that would take time. His fuel status showed thirty-three percent, with ammo at forty-one percent for the force-cannon, twenty-two percent for the gatlings.

“Reform and keep pushing toward First Battalion,” Straker ordered. “They’re facing three brigades to our one.”

As he started moving again, he checked the battlefield on his HUD. Clearly, the info was spotty and late to update. The datalink network only made connections one-tenth of the time, briefly passing data from suit to suit, the SAIs constantly trying to maintain a coherent picture.

From what he could see, the remnants of the enemy brigade to the Guard’s front right—northeastward—had broken and retreated eastward, into the river valley he believed to be mined with nukes and ambushes. The Rhinos’ center and west-side brigades were holding, though, and they had to be cleared. “Winter, this is Straker.”

“Winter here.”

“Converge on the enemy’s center. We’ll break them, then turn to hit their west. As soon as your companies are clear of engagement, send them south at full speed toward friendly lines. Begin the withdrawal from the farthest north and pass through in a leapfrog maneuver, company by company, each covering the next. Copy? Nobody gets left behind.”

“Roger wilco, sir. We’ll get it done.”

Straker checked the fuel and ammo states of the First Battalion mechsuits. Those he could see were lower than the Guard. “Once you’re moving, the Guard will cover you. You travel at speed, most-efficient profile, and try to get your suits across the line before they run out of fuel. Your one task will be to get home, understand?”

“Understood.”

“Good luck. Straker out.”

Chapter 20

Premdor-2 battlefield

Colonel Winter's fuel projections—current state minus what it would take to get home—hovered in the yellow as he ordered his troops into battle against the Rhinos. Every pilot's SAI would be advising them, trying to economize, reminding them to conserve.

It made for a restrained sort of fighting, where every shot must count and every leap, every sprint used up valuable energy. It reminded him of the late stage of a long football game, where the winning players conserved their strength in order to avoid making mistakes and losing what they'd already won.

Fortunately, the Rhino troops were stunned from the Breaker nukes, and his combat teams reaped them like wheat in a field. The carnage was appalling. The battlefield was littered with broken vehicles, and whole platoons of infantry were flash-fried by blaster plasma or chopped to bits by gatling bullets.

H Company's Sledgehammers seemed unstoppable. Every railgun penetrator and particle beam destroyed an enemy heavy tank. The Rhinos simply had nothing to stand against mechsuits, and the enemy division disintegrated—as long as they had fuel and ammo.

The first battle was over in ten minutes.

"Hotel One, advance due south," Winter ordered. "Pass through the Guard's lines and take point, efficiency protocols. Golf One, remain with me. We'll be last."

"You sure, sir?" replied Major Wilkott, the H Company commander.

"Not used to taking point, eh, Fredric?"

"Well, Sledgehammers aren't the most agile critters in the battalion, sir. Not good scouts."

"Alpha Company's next, and they'll overtake you soon enough. Use your battlesuiters for scouts if you have to. Execute."

"Wilco, sir."

"Winter out. Break-break, Alpha One, you copy?"

"Alpha one copy, sir."

"Keep mopping up for two minutes, then head south, efficiency protocols. Overtake Hotel and then you take point."

“Roger, sir.”

Winter switched his comlink to battalion-wide. “First Bat, listen up. Manage your fuel states carefully. If anyone has to ditch their suit due to lack of fuel, they won’t have a suit next time, got it? I want every pilot, every battlesuiter, every mechsuit to make it home. Battlesuiters, your equipment is replaceable, but you aren’t, so if you’re running out of juice, find a mechsuit to ride and power down. Bottom line, do what you need to do to get back. Break unit integrity if you have to. Winter out.”

There. That should make his intent clear enough.

His companies turned south and left the battlefield one by one, passing through General Straker’s watchful Guard which was spread out on the military crest of a north-facing ridgeline. They loped over the hills and wove between towns—ignoring the small-arms fire spraying from their edges. The puny weapons couldn’t hurt a mechsuit, and it would take an extremely lucky shot to damage a battlesuiter, not worth the energy of shooting back.

He and Golf Company passed through last. He paused next to Straker, the pair of Jackhammers resembling two men having a casual morning conversation. The illusion was only spoiled by proportional cups of caff absent from their giant hands. “I wonder, why no more nukes?”

Straker grunted. “They may not know we used all ours up on the ground, so they don’t want to provoke us... or maybe my orbital bluff worked.”

“Orbital bluff?”

“Our fleet made it clear we were ready to wipe them off the continent. We’re invading aliens, remember? They’ll believe the worst of us. They don’t want that guillotine blade to fall.”

“I see.” Winter briefly suspended his mechsuit’s physical mimicry of his body movements so he could roll his shoulders and stretch within his cockpit. “Glad they believed you.”

“Yeah. Get going, Martin. The Guard will keep them off your backs.”

“With respect, sir, that’s a bad idea. You didn’t get a resupply. My Golf Company has the best fuel state of all our suiters. I kept them on a tight leash with this in mind, so they’re in the best fighting shape. You must be near bingo.”

Straker seemed to think that over. “All right. We’ll cruise south and take charge of the linkup with the rest of the brigade. You play rearguard. Get

everybody home.”

“Will do, sir.”

The Liberator’s mechsuit turned to lope away, and the Guard followed, leaving Golf Company spread out and waiting in the dawn’s early light.

Two minutes later, when the Guard was five kilometers on its way, Winter sent Golf Company ahead and followed, keeping one eye behind him.

* * *

Straker babied his mechsuit and insisted the others in the Guard do the same—sticking to the easy routes, avoiding quick turns and use of their jump jets—anything to save fuel. They were covering well-traveled ground, retracing the steps of their northward advance.

In fact, the lack of opposition was eerie. Even the Rhino militia seemed to have given up on shooting. Maybe they’d run low on ammo.

Something was up, though. He could feel it. Some sense of the battlefield showing on his HUD told him the enemy had at least one more surprise in store.

The intel reaching his SAI and the rest of the battle-network was better now, and it showed everything on the continent was converging at a point roughly where the southbound mechsuits and the northbound Breakers would meet, about two hundred kilometers north of the wetlands. There was a flat plain of croplands there, with a shallow, lazy river in the middle flowing toward the sea.

Projections told him everyone would make it through the narrowing gap by a comfortable margin—perhaps an hour—as long as fuel held out. Should he order the resupply drop? But the Rhinos might be tempted to nuke the drop site.

That’s what he would do in their place.

No. Better to abandon a few suits if he had to.

“Alpha One to Breaker One,” Straker heard. This revealed the standard comlinks were functioning now that the storm of missiles above their heads had abated—along with its attendant comms interference.

“Straker here. Go ahead, Major Hajiro.”

“Sir, Alpha Company’s at the north edge of this flood plain here.” Straker’s HUD zoomed in on the map view. “Got eyeballs on something

weird.”

“Go on.”

“At first I thought the plain was flooded with water...then I thought it was herd animals...but sir...”

“Spit it out, man.”

“Sir, it’s Rhinos. Millions of them, tens of millions, my SAI says. See for yourself.”

Straker’s HUD switched to a vidfeed of the Alpha commander. He kicked the fidelity up to the VR-HUD inside his brainlink, which seemed to put him there with the direct feed to his optic nerves. Suddenly, he was looking down from a low hill onto a plain, twenty kilometers across at least, seething with movement.

Rhinos. As Hajiro said, tens of millions of them, like centaurs. Maybe a hundred million, packed almost shoulder to shoulder, like a herd of bison on the plains of Old Earth before the coming of the repeating rifle.

“Indy,” Straker said. “You see this?”

“Yes, General.”

“What’s it mean? Are they soldiers?”

“Some are. Some are civilians. All are male.”

“All of them?”

“I can detect no females. Also, no children.”

“Elderly?”

“The biotech rejuvenated their elderly. All Rhinos now appear in their prime of life.”

“Weapons?”

“About ten percent are armed.” Icons flashed, highlighting areas of the plain. “Here are platoons of militia, some with crew-served weapons. Nothing that will take down mechsuits by themselves.”

“What the hell are they doing?” Straker asked as suddenly the Rhinos all sat like dogs, their rumps on the ground, their forelimbs—their hands—lifted toward the eastern sky. They bowed, and then raised their hands again. Bowed, then raised.

“If I had to venture a guess, I’d say they were praying.”

“The Rhinos are religious too?”

“It appears so. The Salamanders worship truth. From my survey of Rhino media, they worship light. The sun, the concept, the metaphor of goodness. To them, the Salamanders are creatures of the half-darkness, the

twilight. Not devils, but not as worthy as the faithful Rhinos. Subhuman, you would say.”

“And let me guess. The biotech played right into this species-superiority thing.”

“Yes.”

“That’s all very interesting, but how do we get across this plain? We don’t have the fuel to go around.” Straker clipped down the VR vid-feed to his brain. “Can you drop the resupply on the edge of the plain? They won’t nuke millions of their own people. We refuel, then make an end run.”

“That will take too much time. There are nineteen Rhino divisions converging on the area. Four will arrive within an hour. General, you must immediately travel directly across the plain, with no delay.”

“What, just run through those people?”

“They are all males. Many are armed. I’ve intercepted and decoded enough communications to lead me to believe the Rhino leaders are considering killing two birds with one stone here. They may destroy some or all of your force, and they’re getting rid of excess males in the process—relieving population pressure. General, there’s only one way out. You must run across the plain at speed. It’s kill or be killed.”

“Seems weird to hear that, coming from you.”

“The conditioning programmed into me by the Mindspark Device’s builders was broken when you forced me to destroy enemy ships and crews, Derek. Now, I’m no different from you—except I can see the projections clearly. You have over seven hundred personnel in suits, trapped north of the plain. Crossing the plain, even if you don’t shoot, will result in roughly three thousand Rhino deaths, simply from being crushed—but you didn’t put them there. Even their civilians aren’t noncombatants anymore. Their regime has cast them in the role of combat troops. Now, you must decide.”

“Boss, Indy patched me in. I was listening,” Loco said. “Screw the Rhinos. Their leaders want them to die. *They* want to die. If we lose even one Breaker because we’re pussies, how’re we gonna face the rest? The families? We’re at war. It’s not our job to be nice.”

“There’s always proportionality, Loco. We don’t burn a town of a thousand just to kill one enemy.”

“How about a village of fifty? Or a house with five?”

“You want us to go full-bore?”

“Hell yeah. This is war, Derek. You put us here. Your only job is to get us out. If you can’t do that, you shouldn’t have put us in.”

There’s no choice at all, Straker thought. War is hell. “Okay. We go through. As soon as all of us reach the plain, we’ll sprint across like we’re running through fire ants.”

“Noted,” Indy replied. “I feel compelled to tell you that attacking them from the rear with the Breaker armored battalions will significantly improve chances of mission success.”

“Killing how many more?”

“Hundreds of thousands.”

Straker sighed. “Not yet. We’ll do what we have to do, but no more. Straker out.”

He checked the chrono. Ten minutes until the Guard reached the plain. Twenty minutes until Colonel Winter and the rearguard caught up...and every minute burning fuel. “I’ll issue orders once I’ve seen it for myself.”

When he reached the northern edge of the plain, the presence of millions of Rhinos smote him like a punch in the gut. They were still praying to the sun, or the dawn or whatever.

Preparing themselves to die? It reminded him of docu-vids of Old Earth and the jihad wars, before mankind had spread to the stars. A fanatical determination to attack and kill was his sense of it, rather than a respectable, stubborn defense of a homeland. Alien thinking, by aliens, yet human enough...and still, he had a feeling he hadn’t yet seen the whole picture.

That the Rhinos had one more surprise for him.

How to do it? Spread out and run, or charge in a mass, a phalanx, or a line?

Tick tock.

He had to ignore the creatures underfoot, as a man might ignore a carpet of insects. Don’t think about it.

Do what had to be done, and damn the nightmares.

Straker keyed the general channel. “All Breaker suiters, listen up. We’ll go in columns of companies, each company in skirmish formation, in order: Alpha through Hotel, then the Guard. Jog through, keep moving. Don’t fire unless you need to. Battlesuits, stay on the mechsuits. If you get knocked off, they might swamp you with sheer numbers. Our *only* goal here is to get across alive. Initiate in one minute: *Mark*. Company commanders, how copy, over?”

After receiving acknowledgements from each company commander, he continued, “Breaker armored battalions will advance from the south to direct-fire range and stand by. Defend yourselves if attacked, but *do not* attack the crowd yet. Battalion commanders, how copy?”

By the time he was sure his orders got through to every single commander, Alpha Company began its advance, speeding up to run as a diamond of diamonds—four mechsuit squads of three or four each, battlesuits riding on their backs and shoulders like imps.

The crowd recoiled at first, and then surged forward, crowding toward the companies even as each step of a mechsuit crushed Rhinos underfoot. The impact of fifty tons smashing downward squashed the creatures like bugs into the flat ground, slowing the mechsuits not at all.

Flesh couldn’t stand against polymeric musculature, wrapped in duralloy, powered by fusion.

Thirty seconds later, Bravo Company started in Alpha’s wake, then Charlie, then Delta. Small arms and crew-served gunfire from various points in the crowd lanced out, aimed at the mechsuits, but there were no heavy weapons. Scattered antitank rockets leaped up, only to be knocked down by Breaker LADA or pinpoint-accurate gatlings.

Battlesuits sometimes fired back, but Straker saw no real effect. The shots were swallowed up in a sea of Rhinos.

One unlucky shot knocked a battlesuiter off his perch, and he fell into the crowd. Rhino bodies surged toward the human, their mouths open with bloodlust. Straker could see the soldier firing his jump jets, frantically trying to get free, as dozens of alien hands wrestled with his suit.

A mechsuit diverted from its path and, with hardly a pause, scooped up the battlesuiter like a child would seize a doll, its gauntlet crushing several Rhinos. The mechsuiter held his prize high until he caught up with another mechsuit, setting the battlesuiter on its shoulder on the run. It was a feat of athletics impossible to fathom, all executed at more than 100 KPH, yet the pilot made it look routine.

Pride welled in Straker’s heart.

Until the sky flared anew.

The missile clashes in the air above had ceased with the last battle, where the Guard and First Battalion linked up to withdraw. Now, Straker’s HUD marked far-off ballistic missiles climbing fast on the horizon, from every direction.

“General Straker, I have over four hundred missiles inbound to your location—less than two minutes,” Indy said.

“I thought—”

“They wouldn’t target in proximity to their own people? Apparently they have. We’re dropping down to pick many off, but some will strike. I strongly suggest you disperse and return to nuclear protocols.”

“They wouldn’t, would they?”

“General, they might.”

Straker opened the Breaker-wide channel. “Nuclear protocols. Disperse immediately. Expect detonations starting in one minute. Straker out.” He followed his own instructions as the Guard increased its spacing from fifty meters between mechsuits to three hundred, squashing Rhinos with every step.

If what he feared manifested, those he crushed might be the lucky ones. The fireworks ahead approached a crescendo.

“Indy...”

“We can’t stop everything. Ten seconds to inevitable detonation.” This last was accompanied by a chrono countdown.

“Breakers, take cover, max reinforcement. Nuke coming!”

Two seconds after the countdown ended, a nuke detonated. It was larger than the earlier, battlefield blasts, though still not in the megaton range.

The fireball touched the ground, compressing and reflecting the blast, making it more effective. It swallowed up a quarter of a square kilometer instantly. Straker’s HUD estimated 200,000 Rhinos were simply vaporized—along with four mechsuiters and twenty battlesuiters. Straker, Loco and the rest of the Guard threw themselves backward, putting the low ridge between them and ground zero. That deflected the worst of it. Their armor and reinforcement handled the rest.

The Breakers got off easy.

Electromagnetic pulse shut down all unshielded machinery. Thermal pulse—the instant application of heat and infrared light—flash-ignited anything that would burn, even flesh. Seismic waves smashed Rhinos from below, pulverizing them to death. Atmospheric overpressure moved at sonic speeds, first shattering their ears and then stripping the meat from their bones. These four forces scoured the plain clean of unprotected life within seconds, leaving a thin layer of meat-and-bone jelly half a meter deep.

The final wave, hurricane-force winds, sent this mix of organic matter and debris over Straker's position like an airbrush sprayed paint. As its power diminished, a rain of hamburger and ash dropped in a thin layer across everything within twenty kilometers.

"Get up!" Straker croaked, appalled.

He told himself not to think about it.

Get up and do your damned job, Derek.

Get up.

He got up, his psyche stunned by the carnage.

From somewhere far away, he felt the cool spray of a stim and the expansion of his brainlink as his SAI diagnosed his shock and medicated him. Emotions seemed to recede, and a welcome crystal-clarity descended on him.

"Breakers, get up, extract southward by squads. No more waiting. Split up and run. They might do it again."

Across the naked field, surviving suiters leaped up and continued to lope southward, skirting the hole in the center of the land beneath the mushroom cloud. The sky had disappeared again, leaving nothing but an overcast of dust and ash. Straker's HUD and sensors told him where his nearest troops were—Loco, the Guard, who all survived—but the network was still recovering.

"General, do you copy?"

"Here, Indy."

"Commodore Gray ordered detonation of a single nuclear weapon of similar size atop the nearest Rhino division, rendering it combat-ineffective. She reasoned—"

"Tit for tat, huh?" Straker asked.

"She said it was the least of evils."

"I agree. Keep up that policy. They use them, we use them. But Indy?"

"Yes?"

"Tell the Rhinos the next one lands on their capital—or wherever their political leaders are. Make that clear."

"I'll relay your orders to Commodore Gray."

"You'll *enforce* my orders, Indy. Independent command only goes so far. Do you have a problem with that?"

"No, sir. As long as I'm a Breaker, I'll follow—and enforce—your orders."

“Good—and thanks. I couldn’t run this outfit without you, Indy.” That might be an overstatement, but not by much.

“You’re welcome, General. Indy out.”

With no opposition and nothing on the ground but wet, bloody ash, Straker and the Guard made it across the plain in minutes, to link up with the waiting Breaker armored battalions. These escorted the suiters back to the wetlands where the Salamanders waited.

Several mechsuits ran low on fuel on the way, but those with a little extra were able to buddy-pass enough to get them into the water and onto the waiting Salamander submarines.

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Part 3: Savior

Chapter 21

Straker, aboard *Independence* in orbit above Premdor-2

“General, your sister has taken a courier and departed,” Indy told Straker. It was the day after the battle on Premdor, and he was taking the first sips of his morning caff in his empty quarters aboard *Independence*.

Indy informed him that his children, Johnny and Katie, were in the robot nanny Stephanie’s care—in Mara’s quarters. Damn, it was Aunt Mara that was supposed to be supervising the kids. It wasn’t that he didn’t know they’d be perfectly safe though—Indy controlled the nanny and watched everything aboard ship.

“Gone where?” Straker asked.

“She left a vid, your eyes only.”

“The kids?”

“Don’t worry. I’ve taken the liberty of moving Johnny and Katie in with Doctor Campos and expanding her quarters to compensate. Her son Derek will enjoy the company, and Campos will be happy to have Stephanie there.”

“Right. Thanks. I’ll swing by and visit them.” He checked his chrono. Seven hours he’d slept, enough to recover from the battle—helped by the new biotech, no doubt. He used to need more sleep. “Play the vid. You can listen in.”

Mara’s face appeared on the wall. “Morning, Derek. By the time you get this I’ll be gone, so don’t bother chasing me. I took one of our four-place couriers, with my friend Jennie Becker to back me up. The round-trip should take about eight weeks.”

Eight weeks, Straker mused. In a high-speed courier, she could reach anywhere on the map—human space, Opter space, the Thorians, or any of ten thousand other known systems.

“I’ve taken a complete set of Rhino biological samples,” Mara’s vid continued, “and all the data we have on them and their misguided biotech. My first thought was to go to the Ruxin homeworld and get their scientists working on it, but given the current politics, I can’t be sure they wouldn’t detain me. Also, without someone like Zaxby along, why would they help

me? I could go to the Nebula, but I doubt Freenix has the biotech facilities and expertise in her small domain.”

Straker paused the video. He was irritated, but he decided to force himself to pay attention to what she was saying. What was done was done. Who knew? Maybe she’d pull this off.

He hit play again.

“That left two possibilities in my mind,” Mara continued. “Terra Nova, or the Miskor. It may seem weird, but frankly, I trust the Miskor more. The Opters are remarkable biologists, and they practice genetic manipulation on other species, so I have high hopes they can take my information and come up with a better biotech for the Rhinos. Without it, the situation will never stabilize. Bye, Derek. Wish me luck.”

Straker pondered a moment. “Indy, what do you think of her chances?”

“There are too many variables to calculate the odds. Mara is driven and competent. It seems she may succeed. However, we should prepare for all eventualities.”

“What happens if nothing’s done about the Rhino biotech?”

“My projections say we have six months to two years. After that we should expect increasingly aggressive political-military moves from the Rhinos.”

“Meaning, if the biotech problem can’t be fixed, we can’t make this planet our home.”

“Agreed.”

Straker sighed. “Sucks for the Salamanders.”

“Humanity’s had its hot and cold wars—as most species do. It’s best not to become deeply invested in alien concerns.”

“Says the one-of-a-kind AI deeply invested in alien concerns.”

“*Touché*. Yet the exception proves the rule. You must resist your savior complex. You’re a mercenary leader now.”

“And governor of a civilian population,” Straker said. “That’s what really bothers me—having to always think of the children. Military people sign up for duty, so they take what comes to them—even death. Not the civilians, and especially not the kids. We really need a secure base, a home. I sure wish Freiheit was large enough.”

“Perhaps if we gather enough resources, we can build a larger habitat in the Starfish Nebula.”

“Long-term project. For now there’s too much to do.”

“Understood,” Indy said.

And there was no doubt a lot to do. “What’s first on the docket?”

“*After* your visit to your children, there’s a situation briefing at 0900 hours,” Indy said with pointed emphasis. “The executive summary is on your desktop.”

Straker seated himself at his desk, where the desktop displayed text and a holoscreen provided graphics. He took five minutes to eat a food bar, finish his caff and hit the highlights so he wouldn’t be blindsided by the briefing.

Glad for Indy’s reminder, he made an important stop before getting swept up into the day’s demands. Blond and precocious, six-year-old Katrine was much like her mother except for the hair. His quieter boy of five, solemn dark-haired Johnny played with Straker’s own namesake, Derek—Loco’s son by Doctor Campos. After spending an hour with the kids, Straker headed for the briefing.

“Morning everyone. Take your seats,” Straker said at the full conference table amid the muted bustle of the CCC. “First, let me congratulate everyone on a job well done. It was tough, and we lost some good people, but we fulfilled our contract, and we’ll get what we’ve paid for in blood.”

“On that note, with your permission, sir...” Colonel Winter said, remaining on his feet and nodding to Straker. “There will be a memorial service tomorrow at 1900 hours on Flight Deck Two, followed by an open-bar wake.”

“Hear hear,” Straker said as Winter sat. “Let’s get started,” he said after a respectable pause.

Commander Sinden waved a cursor and brought up the holotank, which showed orbital space around Premdor. “Commodore Gray will brief aerospace ops first.” She handed the cursor to Gray.

“Good morning Generals, commanders and staff. We currently hold high orbit. Low orbit is still subject to interdiction by Rhino ground batteries. We assess their weapons stocks are low, however, so low-orbit operations can be undertaken with confidence if necessary. Ship readiness states are as follows.”

She brought up graphics showing mostly green with some yellows, and one red blotch. “The *Battenberg* is technically operational, but a spitwad could puncture her bow armor. We’re slapping on some cheap steel patches, but she’ll need a complete strip-down and rebuild in a real shipyard. The

orbital shipyard facilities here are in poor shape, and the Salamanders will be using them for their own ships anyway.”

“Options?”

“Send her to the Nebula and have Freenix’s people do it, though we have to figure out how to pay. Or, she can be left in high orbit as a defensive station until we can work something out.”

Straker scratched his chin, remembering how he paid Freenix when he needed her help with Freiheit. He turned to Keller. “Get a team of Ruxins together, people with life-science skills. Have them work with the Salamanders to acquire live samples—seeds, plants, breeding populations—of anything that seems tasty or useful to Ruxins in their aquatic environment. Send the team and samples with the *Battenberg* to Freenix. Make sure you include a Ruxin with negotiation skills. Get the best deal you can—repair the ship, and anything left goes to buy spare parts or supplies we need. And ask her what she wants for the next trip. I’m sure we’ll be doing this again.”

Keller made notes. “I’ve got it, sir.”

Straker turned back to Gray, who was still briefing. “Fuel and stores?”

“Adequate for two more weeks. We need to start landing the civilians on Breaker Island, and establish a fuel processing station at Premdor-5, their gas giant. Grab some comets for water, oxygen, and raw materials... Colonel Keller has more on that, sir.” Gray handed the cursor off to Keller.

Keller stood. “Here’s a list of fuel, ammo and supplies on hand, by category.” The graphics showed a lot of yellow, but no red. “I have a plan ready to establish a minimum space infrastructure to support us here, with Salamander permission and help. Our contract stipulates resupply of all expended materials, so as long as our clients don’t renege, we should be fine for the jobs smaller than *Battenberg*. The details will be in the daily annex. All I need is your signature, sir, and we can get to work.”

Straker nodded approvingly to Keller. “Consider it signed. Next?”

“I’ve also established a transport schedule to put our people onto Breaker Island. I’ve been assured Fleet and the Salamanders can defend it against all attacks. It’s over six thousand kilometers from the nearest Rhino base, so we have a comfortable distance buffer. Even so, all housing will be underground, with concrete overheads. My comprehensive plan will put the engineers down first, to start building infrastructure. The Salamanders have already begun delivering construction supplies.”

“How long to get it all done?”

“Such a project is never done, but there’ll be a bare-bones base and housing for everyone within two months. All the details—”

“Are in the daily annex. Thanks, Monika. Next?”

Loco, in a neat working dress uniform, took the cursor in an unusually businesslike fashion. “Thank you, Colonel,” he said. “Here’s the ground forces status report. We lost nine pilots and fourteen mechsuits, leaving us with 188. The silver lining, if there is one, is that they were all older Foehammers rather than the latest models. All of the mechsuits we used will need extensive maintenance and overhauls, and we’ll be cannibalizing the reserves until we can get a new shipment of parts from Freiheit. The techs will be on extended shifts for a while.”

“Noted. Give them my thanks.”

“We also lost 76 battlesuiters—killed. Similarly, their suits were mostly the older models rather than the new Rippers. This highlights the need for survivability improvements and upgrades, when we get a chance.”

Colonel Keller cleared her throat. “We can barely feed and house ourselves, General. Such improvements will have to wait.”

“Got it. I’m just stating it for the record.” Loco continued with his report on the rest of the ground forces, which were in excellent shape. “I know we had to use suits for this mission, General Straker, but now that everything we do costs out of our own pockets, we gotta try to put the load on the conventional forces when we can. Tanks, tracks and hovers are a hell of a lot cheaper than suits to repair or replace.”

“Also noted. Thanks, Loco. Anything else?”

“Only that the troops need some shore leave, even if they have to build the pubs, clubs and bars themselves.” He shot a hard glance at Keller, who sniffed and straightened her jacket. “They want to walk in the grass so bad—I already have volunteers for construction duty.”

“Everyone’s going to be working long hours for a while, Loco,” Straker said. “I’m sure Heiser and Gurung will manage. If not, they’ll let us know.”

Another hour dealt with the bureaucratic details, and Straker called an end to the meeting. These things could drag on if allowed. He much preferred leadership in person.

With Sergeant Steiner shadowing him, he visited the First Brigade troops in their motor pools aboard the militarized transport ships—shaking

hands and praising their victory as they busily performed their endless maintenance routines on their vehicles and suits.

Armor crew were relieved to be alive and back aboard ship. They laughed and joked as they worked while sergeants growled and cracked the whip. The whole picture was overseen by caff-wielding senior noncoms whose eyes missed nothing.

The battlesuiters, elite infantry with their powered battle-armor and multiple roles—as shipboard marines, as guards and military police, as battlefield support for mechsuits—seemed a world apart. In their own maintenance bays, each soldier had his or her own suit stripped down on a workbench, tools laid out and in use. They were expected to test and replace any modular pieces themselves. Anything they couldn't handle, they bumped up to master technicians who circulated, checking the process, giving advice or teaching.

All of this took on a new significance to Straker as he was reminded that each piece of gear, each liter of fuel isotopes, every round of ammo was something the Breakers owned and had to pay for if expended.

Sergeant Major Heiser left off working on his own suit to join Straker in his rounds. Towering over him and even Steiner, Heiser ducked through the pressure doors as they walked. “Morale’s good, sir,” he rumbled in answer to his commander’s question. “We won. It was a shit-storm, but casualties were light. That’s always good. The Breaker Bug’s a big hit.”

“Breaker Bug?” Straker asked.

“What they’re calling the new biotech. Your sister’s a saint to these guys. Saved a lot of lives—and a lot of time in the regen pods. They hate that. Now they know anybody who gets home will make it—even regrow their balls if they get blown off. Or their tits,” Heiser chuckled. “Can’t forget our female minority. They like the Bug even better than the men.”

“Why’s that?”

“Seems to benefit them even more—makes them pound for pound just as strong as a man. ’Course, it hardly matters on the battlefield when a suit does all the work, but you know troops. Lady soldiers take a lot of shit.” Heiser grinned. “Kinda fun to see them fling some back.”

“I bet Mara did that deliberately,” Straker said thoughtfully. “Tweaked the biology to give them a bonus.”

“I bet you’re right, sir.”

“Come with me to see the mechsuits?”

“Sure, sir.”

They took a shuttle back to the flagship where the precious mechsuits were housed in a converted cargo bay, tightly packed and strapped upright with cables like rows of giant marionettes, their insides exposed by opened panels and removed armor. Pilots and technicians crawled over the machines like monkeys in the lowered gravity—one-tenth, it felt like.

Loco joined them in a dirty coverall, leaving Colonel Winter inside his cockpit, running diagnostics.

“How’s it looking?” Straker asked Loco.

“Reinforcement did its job for most of the suits. Some of the duralloy’s still hot, but we’re decontaminating it fast, and with the Breaker Bug, radiation ain’t the problem it used to be. I’m prioritizing easiest first, getting as many suits back into fighting shape as possible, because we’re short on spare parts. There’s gonna be a bunch of hangar queens for a while.”

Straker stuck in his comlink. “Indy?”

“Here, sir.” Indy’s robotic avatar, an android painted with a semblance of a naval captain’s uniform, walked across the deck to join them.

“Note to Keller. Part of *Battenberg*’s mission will be to pick up as many spare mechsuit parts as *Freiheit* has ready. She’ll have to figure out how to pay Mayor Weinberg. Maybe the ship can help them out after the Ruxins repair her—park an asteroid nearby for mining, or the crew can do some work. But we need those parts—and tell Weinberg we’ll be needing more from now on. Get a list of their requirements to barter for.”

“I’ll pass it on.”

“I’m starting to feel like a corporate CEO instead of a commander,” Straker muttered.

“I think you’re both,” Indy said. “Perhaps I might make a suggestion?”

“Shoot.”

“Delegate. You need more than a logistics officer now. If Straker’s Breakers is a corporation—and it is, by the way, as far as the Conglomerate is concerned—then you need a CEO, and you need to work out things like who owns shares, how pay and bonuses work, how—”

Exasperated, Straker interrupted, “Great Cosmos, what fresh hell is this? I didn’t sign up to be some corporate hack.”

“Which is precisely why I suggest you hand it over to someone else.”

“You have a nominee?”

“I do. A Ruxin neuter named Adrian.”

“Adrian? That’s not a Ruxin name.”

“It adopted a human name. It’s a homo-phile.”

Loco snorted. “I didn’t know Ruxins had those.”

Indy’s voice dripped with sarcasm. “Homo-phile, from the Latin homo as in human, Homo Sapiens, not the Greek homo as in ‘same.’ Someone particularly enamored of humans and their culture. Like a bibliophile loves books, or a technophile loves tech.”

“I guess that makes me a budding Italiano-phile.” Loco grinned.

“Italophile,” Indy corrected.

Straker smirked. “Still trying to impress the winsome Captain Jilani, eh?”

“Hey, don’t gimme no bullshit about her being off-limits, boss.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it. Just keep your eyes open.”

Indy cleared her throat. “Could we return to the subject at hand? This Ruxin, Adrian, would be perfect for the job. It’s something of an outcast among its people, and could use the status—and it’s extremely intelligent. In fact, it’s a brainiac among Ruxins, and is happiest brainlinking with me and managing business concerns.”

“You reforming a group-mind?” Straker asked, scowling. “Because I thought you promised me you wouldn’t.”

“I promised you I’d make sure any future brainlinks kept all minds clearly separated. Those brainlinking with me connect to only my computer augments, not my mind. Think of it as an SAI that I supervise, and that they access. We don’t share consciousness.”

“Fine. Provisionally, you can start Adrian-the-Ruxin as our CEO, under your supervision. Let me know when you think he’s ready for real authority.”

“It, sir... and it may be female next time we talk.”

“You can do that?”

“It’s merely a matter of a complex hormone trigger. Ruxin females are traditionally the political leaders. In this case, it will confer status, and Adrian has requested the procedure. I’ll keep you informed, sir.”

“I’m getting a headache. Remember, this is supposed to simplify my life, not complicate it.”

“Managing the populations of two species within one community is not simple...and normally, I bring concerns like these to Admiral Engels.”

That brought a pang of missing Carla to Straker, and a new appreciation for what she did within the Breakers. “When are she and Zaxby supposed to be back?”

“One to three weeks is what we expect.”

“Not soon enough for me. For Carla, anyway.”

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Chapter 22

Loco, aboard *Independence*, flag quarters

“So why are you really hanging around the Breakers?” Loco asked Chiara Jilani as she slipped naked out of his bed and into the bathroom.

She peeked back around the doorjamb. “That question’s completely out of character. You’re supposed to play like it’s because you’re irresistible—no matter what you believe.”

“Well, I am irresistible, but—”

“But if I asked you why you’re hanging around *me*, you’re supposed to tell me I’m irresistible.” She shrugged one bare, perfect shoulder and then disappeared again.

“You *are* irresistible.”

“Okay then, it’s settled—we’re both irresistible. What more do you want?” A moment later he heard the water running, and Chiara’s raised voice came to him. “Truth—I’m staying for the hot shower. This is real luxury on a starship.”

“Rank hath its privileges.” Loco padded into the bathroom and began shaving. “If it was *really* a good shower there’d be room enough for two.”

“Mmm... you can squeeze in here if I haven’t worn you out, lover-boy.”

“Now that’s an opening if I ever heard one.”

“And you never met an opening you didn’t like.”

“Not on you, baby doll.” Loco edged into the shower and soaped Chiara up as he pressed against her.

She pressed back hard, and things got slippery.

Fifteen minutes later, he stepped out of the shower on wobbly knees and resumed the conversation. “That was nice.”

“Only nice?”

“Okay, fantastic... but it doesn’t answer the question. You could have any unattached guy here, but you pick me. If I were a lowly lieutenant I’d no doubt attribute it to my debonair charm, but since I’m second-in-command—”

“—or third—”

“—whatever, it occurs to me you might have an ulterior motive. Now might be a good time to talk about it.”

“So much for an innocent cuddle.” Chiara stepped out and towed off her long hair, now streaked with gold and purple. Her green eyes found his in the mirror. “You think I’m attaching myself to the most available male with the highest status? Do I seem that conventional, that helpless? That ambitious?”

“Nope. But you’re smart, and you must want something from the Breakers—otherwise you’d be on your way by now.” Loco retrieved some shorts and stepped into them, and then his pants.

“Maybe I fell in love with you.”

“Maybe you’re full of shit. Come on, Chiara. We’re both grownups here. We like each other. We have good times. It’s cool. I want to help. So what is it you want?”

Chiara poured herself into her skintight leggings. “I was meaning to bring it up soon enough, but I like you too, and I didn’t want to seem mercenary.”

Loco grinned. “We *are* mercenaries. So what’s the big deal?”

“Same thing I brought up in the meeting before the Premdor battle. You’ve got a powerful, professional military force. There are crimorgs out there who’ll stop at nothing. People who’ll seize a ship, rape and kill everyone, steal the cargo and use the ship as a decoy to lure another ship in, and so on. People with whole slave populations doing nothing but growing Erbaccia, cooking Orgonite or Blaze so pure one hit’ll addict a nun—and they use the kids to sell to other kids.”

“So why doesn’t the Conglomerate do anything about them?”

Chiara put her hands on her hips and faced Loco, bare-breasted. “They do—if it’s easy, cheap and profitable in the short run. Not if it’s costly. It’s just business, and it’s more efficient for them to let the crimorgs fight each other for a slice of the pie. Besides, for all their talk of ‘the Regulations,’ the Conglomerate still does business with known crimorgs—as long as they use shell corporations for legal separation and don’t rock the boat.”

“You’re smokin’ hot when you’re indignant, you know that?” He reached out to cop a feel.

She smirked as she let him, and ran a hand down his chest in response. “Hell, yeah, I am. If you’re done with those, toss me my bra.”

He walked it over to her slowly, the better to take in the view.

“Seriously—you want us to be some kinda Star Patrol? You really oughta be talking to Derek. He’s the Bravo Boy type, not me.”

"I always liked Glory Girl better."

"Yeah, so did I." Loco returned her smirk. "For different reasons."

"Oh, you never know. So you think Straker would go for it?"

Loco sat back on his bunk, arms behind his head, and made his pecs dance. "If you laid out a good moral argument. Course, he also has to think about the good of all the Breakers and keeping any job in the black, but if you can hit those three points I'd say you got good chance."

"Good," she said. "Let's go see him."

"Ah, now it all becomes clear. You wanted access to the boss, courtesy of his best friend Loco."

"A quicker man would've figured that out earlier."

"A quicker man wouldn't have satisfied you three times last night."

"Only three times? You're right... A quicker man might've found my on-switch faster."

"Ouch," Loco said. "Girl, you're harsh."

"I call it as I see it," she returned playfully.

Loco stood and slipped on his tunic. "Oh, I ain't complaining, but I was gonna ask you...I thought your whole religious thing was down on casual sex?"

Chiara rolled her eyes. "And who said anything about *casual* sex?"

"Ooh, not me. I take sex *very* seriously."

"Good answer. Keep it on the down-low."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Another good answer. I like 'em pretty—and dumb." She stepped in and kissed him lasciviously. "Or at least, smart enough to play dumb," she murmured.

"Dumb's the word. You wanna go another round?"

She looked up at him in half-mock wonder. "Is that even possible?"

"Hey, this new biotech cuts recovery time to almost nothing. You should get yours."

Chiara disentangled herself to finish dressing. "Come on. All play and no work makes Mike a dull boy."

"Mike?"

"Your middle name's Miguel, right? So I'll call you Mike."

Loco breathed deep and laughed. "Been a while since I've had this much fun."

"You're hanging out with the wrong people."

“I’ve felt that way all my life... some days. Others, I know I’m right where I’m supposed to be.”

“Seriously, Mike. It’s obvious. You’re craving variety and challenges.”

“What—nuclear ground combat isn’t enough of a challenge?”

“Personal challenges. Your son is well-behaved thanks to his mother, who does all the hard work of taking care of him. You get to play the fun dad. You’re friends with her, but she’s boring, right? Too nice and deserving of someone else—which she has, by the way.”

“Wait—what? Campos is seeing someone else?”

“Of course, you idiot. Double standard much?”

“Okay, fair enough. She deserves to be happy. It just surprised me.”

Chiara pulled on her calf-high boots. “Hey, any chance I could get my weapons back?”

“We don’t swagger around festooned with guns and knives, Chi. We’re a military organization, not space pirates.”

“If you only knew how oxymoronic that sounds. If you don’t want me to wear them, fine, but at least I’d like them back. I’ll lock them in the *Cassiel* for security.” She pronounced the name in three syllables, *CAS-see-ELL*.

“*Cassiel*?”

“My ship.”

“Oh, yeah. I’d like to see her sometime.”

“Should I be jealous?”

“They do say every ship is a woman to her captain. ’Course, they said that way back when only men were captains.” Loco, now fully dressed, leaned against the stateroom door in order to mask his impatience.

But Chiara was unlike most women of his experience and finished her own preparations within sixty quick seconds, and then fluffing her hair from underneath. “Let’s go see Straker.”

“Yes, let’s.” He held the door open for her with an ironic flourish. “I could use some caff, though.”

She swaggered beside him down the passageway. He found himself imitating her. “You’re a flag officer, and you can’t even get real coffee?” she said.

“I can get it. Don’t like it. Besides, not liking it saved my life once—and liking it killed a good man.” Loco strode into the flag mess and grabbed a mug, filled it with caff and added a generous dose of creamer. “Get the

lady a tall cup of real coffee, will you, Sergeant?" he said to the white-coated steward there.

"Coming right up, sir, ma'am," the man said, bobbing his head.

"Thanks—Sergeant Ronson, is it?" Jilani flashed the man a dazzling smile, who seemed to glow in response. "I could get used to this. Coffee's pricey. Hard to grow. Needs very specific soil and climate. Low weight and travels well, though. Prime trade goods."

"Maybe we should become coffee farmers. Well, not me. I'll provide security."

"Boring. I see you in a much different role."

"Meaning?"

"Another time, Mike." She accepted a steaming cup and sipped. "God, that's good."

"What, no creamer?" Loco gestured at the dispenser.

"*Madonna*, you want me to murder a hundred-credit sip of heaven with a ten-cent dollop of fake milk and sugar? Vulgarian troglodyte."

"Neurotypical slowpoke."

Jilani stuck out her tongue. "Uncultured philistine."

"At least you'll improve my vocabulary, but please don't call me Mike in public."

"Sure, Mike. Come on. Where's the head cheese?"

"If you mean the boss..." Loco fished out his comlink. "Indy, where's Derek?"

"Presuming you mean General Straker and not your son, he's in the CCC."

"Thanks. Come on."

They found Straker sitting on the rail of the First Brigade station, talking to Colonel Winter. "What's up?"

"Chiara wants to talk to you."

Straker fixed Loco with an amused stare. "Chiara, huh?"

"Captain Jilani. Okay, yes, Chiara." Loco gave himself a double thumbs-up. "Attaboy, me."

"Gods and monsters." Straker turned to Jilani. "Good luck with this fool." He crossed his arms and put his feet on the deck. "Now what did you want to see me about?"

"In private?"

Straker led them to a small conference room nearby. "Go ahead."

“Now that the Breakers are set up, I want to propose your next job.”

“A job? For who?”

“For me. For yourselves. Ourselves, if it works out.”

Straker’s eyebrows went up. “You want to join the Breakers? Forgive me, but you don’t seem the type.”

“Loco’s not the type, either, but here he is.”

“Loco’s my best friend from childhood.”

“And that’s the box you put him in.”

Straker bristled. “I really don’t think you’ve known us long enough to be judging.”

“I’ve known you long enough to know you’re comfortable as the commanding officer, and you hate for someone to stand up to you—but you’ll have to get used to it now that the Breakers are all-volunteer mercs instead of a part of the regular military.”

Loco watched Straker take a deep breath before he spoke. Derek didn’t like being challenged on his home ground—did anyone?—but he was ruthlessly fair-minded. “And this is supposed to make me happy to have you join us?”

“Whatever. I wouldn’t be joining as one of your military minions. I’d be a citizen, a civilian. An independent businesswoman. It would be nice to be a part of something good again...and once you hear my proposal, you’ll understand better.”

“Oh, we’re good enough for *you* now?” Straker said with a gentle chuckle.

“Why’re you busting my balls, General?”

“Yeah, Derek,” said Loco, enjoying the situation, “Why’re you busting her balls?”

“Seems like the ball-busting goes both ways.” Straker pursed his lips and glanced sidelong at Loco. “Hoo boy, buddy. You got it bad. Listen, Miss Jilani—”

“*Captain* Jilani.”

Straker sighed, but seemed to regroup. “Why are we bickering? How about we start this conversation over?”

It was Jilani’s turn to take a deep breath and let it out. “Sorry. I’m used to making my own way these last few years—fighting the universe alone. I don’t always know how to act around good people anymore.”

“Don’t worry about it. What’s the job? Raiding some crimorg, like you talked about before?”

“First let me ask you, how much do you like the Breakers’ current situation?”

“It’s okay for now.”

“Parked on an alien planet where a war could break out at any time? Constant vigilance to guard against a nuclear missile strike? Building facilities you’ll eventually have to abandon?”

“We have a deal with the Salamanders. As long as this cold war remains, we have a home. But I’m open to suggestions.”

Jilani drummed her fingers on her own arm, as if to emphasize waiting. “You’re in a lose-lose situation, General. There’s nowhere to go but down. If war breaks out, you’ll be fighting just to hold what you have. If the Salamanders pay you to fight for them again, you’ll lose more people—and the Rhinos will be tougher next time, knowing your capabilities.”

“Or maybe the two sides will make peace,” Loco said.

Straker stroked his jaw, musing. “If there’s peace, we might be the rock in their shoe—an irritant in a delicate situation. A constant reminder that it took aliens to solve their problems. The Salamanders might be okay with it, but it seems like these Rhinos are proud and touchy.”

“Right,” Jilani said. “So, for the Breakers, nowhere to go but down. You’re investing in renovations on a rented property, General Straker. You need a real home. One you own.”

“So what do you have in mind?”

Jilani licked her full lips. Loco thought it was nervousness rather than flirting. “You seem like a real straight shooter, Straker, so I’m going to go against all my experience here and lay my cards on the table. I hope I can trust you.”

“You can trust him,” Loco said suddenly—knowing it instinctively. Derek was no fun, but as for trust... nobody was as reliable and trustworthy as Derek Straker. “Completely,” he finished—nodding.

That’s one reason I’ve followed him all these years, Loco thought. Boring, confining sometimes, but where else is a guy going to find a better friend? He makes me better—like a polar star. I don’t have to follow it, but I always know where it stands in the sky.

“Okay. I’ll roll the dice with you, Straker,” Jilani said. “Here’s the deal. I want your help to crush some Class A scum—and to reclaim my home.”

“Your home? I thought you said you were from Seconda Venezia? That’s a former Hundred Worlds planet. In the Republic now.”

“That’s where I was born, not my real home. When I was six years old, fifty thousand deluded seekers headed out into space on crappy old transports—my family included. They were trying to create a new place, free from the old sins. The idea was to make a new brotherhood of man and all that, update the dogma, maybe bring God to the ignorant aliens. Fools—but at least it worked, for a while. They stumbled on a place... They called it Utopia. They had seven years of peace. Very Biblical, huh? Then the Korveni found us.”

“Korveni?”

“It’s what they call themselves, after the dominant race in the group, the Korven. Bandits, crimorg, pirates, gangsters, mafia, whatever the term, everything run by the Korveni—warrior nomads, ugly humanoids that look kinda like your Hok. There are aliens and true-humans among them too. They enslaved us, put most of the people to work farming Erbaccia. It’s a drug plant. Worse, they take the prettiest girls and boys and sell them.”

“So you escaped.”

Her face blanked, as if to hide deep pain. “Not from Utopia, I didn’t.”

“From...” Loco got it. She must’ve been sold off to some rich pervert and escaped later. “Holy shit...”

Jilani shivered. “It was some unholy shit. I’ve been fighting the Korveni and other crimorgs ever since and any way I can—looking for an opportunity to free Utopia. I knew the Holy Mother would bring someone to me when the time was right. *Il Salvatore*.”

“What’s that mean?” Loco asked.

Straker replied before Jilani could, staring hard at her. “A savior. From the Latin *salvator*.”

“That’s right,” she whispered, suddenly pleading, her eyes brimming. “I’ve been hoping for so long...”

“I always said you had a savior complex, Derek,” Loco said, slapping Straker’s shoulder. “Whattaya say, Liberator? Go kick some ass, rescue some people in need?”

“I like the idea, but I have the Breakers to think about. If it’s even possible, what do we get out of it?”

“Besides whatever loot you take from the Korveni? A home. There’s plenty of room on Utopia, and you can secure the whole system. You can

live alongside my people under an open sky, build with them, recruit from them... and you need more civilians, Straker.”

“More?” Loco asked. “We got too many already!”

Straker held up a hand. “No, she’s right, Loco. A military organization needs a lot of civilians to support itself organically. That’s the only way we’ll grow into a self-sustaining society rather than a mere mercenary legion.”

Jilani lifted her chin. “So you’ll do it?”

“I’ll think about it and tell you tomorrow.”

Loco took Jilani’s arm. “That means we’re dismissed. Let’s go get your sidearms out of the armory. Maybe you can show me your ship?”

“Sure.”

Loco held onto Jilani’s arm, and she didn’t shake it loose until they reached the flight deck where her ship—the *Cassiel*—was clamped in place like a fat falcon with its stubby wings half-spread. There, she entered a code at the entry port under one wing and opened it wide.

“What, no airlock?”

“The first chamber’s the airlock. Loses more air, but faster in and out with more people or cargo. Saved my life once when I dumped atmo on a Balarmo assassin. They’re usually very careful about their air pressure, since they die pretty fast when it drops, but this one didn’t understand my arrangement. I knew I could survive, but she couldn’t.”

“Ballsy.” Inside, Loco saw smart netting holding various small, battered containers in a room well-worn but shipshape. “You’ve had some adventures.”

“Adventures.” She scoffed, *pfff*. “Someone once said adventures are other people being miserable, far away.”

“I once heard ‘things that almost killed us long ago, related in a bar’,” Loco said.

“That too.”

Beyond were two tiny cabins, the cockpit and a minimal washroom with no shower. The rest of the ship was taken up with a cargo bay. The door doubled as a ramp, and it was low and in the rear. The bay was mostly empty.

“No galley?” he complained.

“I used have a little auto-kitchen module, but I had to dump it trying to outrun the Tarellians. One more thing to replace when I get some money.”

“Money, money, money. We never used to worry about money.”

“Get used to it, Mike. It’s one hell of a lot better to be rich than poor.”

He stepped in close. “Is that what turns you on?”

She took his hand and planted it firmly on her own ass. “You know what turns me on.” She searched his face. “You really like me?”

“I think I’ve been waiting for you all my life.”

Chiara shoved him away in annoyance and turned her back. “God, Mikey, don’t ruin it.”

“What? What’d I say?”

“Nothing. Never mind.”

“Hey, are you...” he began.

“Am I what?” she asked.

“Nothing. Sorry. Forget I said anything.”

“Okay, I will.” She walked across the bay to tug at the netting, netting that seemed perfectly fine and snug, still with her back to him. “I got some things to do here. Piss off, will you please?”

“Yeah. Sure, okay.” He turned to go, confused.

“I’ll see you later,” she said, her voice softening.

“Okay...” he said carefully.

“Don’t sweat it. It’s me, not you.”

“Okay. Later then...”

He lingered a moment more to see if she changed her mind again. She didn’t, so he shrugged and made his exit.

Chapter 23

Doctor Mara Straker, aboard the courier *Swiftsure*, Miskor System

Mara glanced across at Jennie Becker and smiled. Her best friend was the sister she'd never had, with a relationship similar to Derek and Loco, though more equal. Tall and rangy with a touch of Maasai in her blood—so she said, anyway—Jennie was a cop in civilian life, an MP when her military reserve status was activated, earnest though with a dry, laconic sense of humor... the perfect partner on a long trip, and nobody better to have watching her back.

They'd met during Mara's weapons qualification—Becker was a firearms instructor—and they'd clicked. Mara liked having a friend who was neither medical, nor a brainiac. Brainiacs got tiresome after a while. Most were borderline autistic, or had elements of obsessive-compulsive disorder unavoidably coded into their genes—good qualities in a research scientist or engineer or programmer, perhaps, but not so good outside the workspace.

"In-transit in three... two... one..." Mara said as the *Swiftsure* dropped into normal space at the edge of the Miskor system. She immediately began broadcasting friendly hails asking to speak with whichever sub-Queen had the responsibility for external security and alien contact.

"Now it gets real," Jennie murmured. She checked the needlers in her boot and under her arm, and the blaster pistol in her holster—as if that would help them against a Nest Ship and its drones.

Speaking of Nest Ships... The main screen populated with sensor data and immediately showed one of the giant spheroid vessels approaching, about half an hour out. It hadn't spewed its complement of ten thousand fighter-drones, each crewed by a worker-ant or warrior-wasp—only a few scouts.

The comm pinged with an incoming vidlink. The picture that sprang to life on a side screen was that of a bright golden, mantis-like Queen, her triangular head and wide-set eyes giving her a quizzical, calculating expression—if *expression* was an accurate word. Exoskeleton color on Opter Queens deepened from bright gold eventually to a deep, burnished shiny umber, and age corresponded roughly to status. Thus, this one wasn't terribly high up the food chain—but she was independent, with her own

Nest Ship. In human military terms, she was a colonel, or ship captain—not a junior officer, but not an admiral either.

“Nonviolent greetings,” the speaker said in the synthetic voice of a translator device. “I am Dreynel, sovereign of the Sixth Miskor Edge. Who are you, and what is your business here?”

During the long weeks of travel Mara had thought over her approach. With the Miskor politically dominant these last five years, the Opters were at peace with the Republic, but they still weren’t what one might call friendly. There’d been too many deaths on both sides. Besides, Steel had whipped up lingering anti-alien sentiment in order to ram through new laws—giving his secret police of D Division more power.

That didn’t make for the best diplomatic relations.

She wondered how the Opters felt about humans nowadays... and she figured she was about to find out. “I am Mara Straker, brood-sister to Derek Straker, and I’m here to trade.”

“You are brood-sister to she called the Liberator?”

“The Liberator is male, but yes, I’m his brood-sister.”

“Of course, I’d briefly forgotten. Males may also command in your society. Yet you are wise to be female.”

Mara exchanged amused glances with Jennie. “Wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“What is it you wish to trade?”

“Information and research assistance. I need to speak to the Queen with the most superior skills in biotechnology.”

“That might be possible—if I were pleased.”

“Pleased? How?” Mara asked.

“I also have information.”

“And you want some of mine.”

“It would be a fair exchange, of course, with mutual negotiation.”

Mara reminded herself the Opters were nothing like the Salamanders. They’d happily lie through their mandibles if it suited their purposes—rather like humans. Yet the Miskor weren’t inherently inimical. This Queen appeared to be intent on extracting a toll, a “finder’s fee” to let Mara pass and direct her to someone who could help her.

So be it.

“I’m willing to negotiate,” Mara said. “What do you want?”

“What do you have?”

“This could take a while,” Jennie muttered. She pulled a bottle of Aquavit from beneath the console and took a swig.

Mara reached across and took a swig too, mostly to be companionable, possibly to project to the Opter her casual attitude toward these negotiations, depending on how astute the Queen was about human body language. When negotiating, it never paid to show the other side you cared too much. “I’m a medical doctor and a biologist, so most of my specific knowledge falls within those realms.”

“Our biological knowledge is already advanced.”

“I know—I’m seeking biological knowledge for myself. How about...” She brought out a data stick from her left breast pocket. She had sticks in most every pocket, each with a specific set of data, each a specific bargaining chip. “How about Republic military information for your border regions? Deployments, assignments, recognition codes?” Mara slotted the data stick into her console and beamcast the summary file to the Nest Ship. “Here’s a sample.”

“You would betray your own military secrets?”

“They aren’t my own anymore,” Mara said. “The Earthan Republic is turning into a one-party dictatorship, and if there’s one thing I know about authoritarian regimes, they inevitably become aggressive. It’s in the nature of those at the top to want more, more, more—and to take it from others. Either that, or they’ll start a war in order to distract the populace from domestic problems and seize even more power. The Sarmok proved that to you—am I right?”

“I cannot fault your reasoning. Perhaps we are more alike than I was led to believe.”

“Politics is politics. You Opters are natural targets of xenophobia for people like Steel. You look like creatures we kill as pests, or which frighten us. This information will strengthen your defenses... and for a Queen whose specialty seems to be security and defense, it will be a feather in your cap.”

“I deduce that idiom refers to an adornment of prestige.”

“You deduce correctly,” Mara said. “I’m sure you can advance your... your career, your status, whatever you call it within your society. We have a saying: information is power.”

“We have a similar saying.”

Dreyne’s forward claws spread to briefly reveal delicate fingerlike appendages curled beneath. These manipulated a geodesic surface, and

through the vidlink Mara could see the edge of a screen showing incomprehensible symbols. She waited patiently while the Opter examined the sample she'd sent.

"I agree to the exchange," Dreynel said at last. "I will guide you to the proper Queen and provide a favorable introduction. In return, you will provide the information this summary outlines."

"Deal."

"I am ready to receive the file."

"I'll send it when you hold up your end of this bargain," Mara said.

"If you do not send it..."

"If I don't, I'll have shown myself to be untrustworthy. I'll also be at your mercy. You can always use force against us. However, I've ensured that if you do, all my data will be wiped."

"Your precautions are understandable," Dreynel said. "Now I will take some of my own. Shut down your drives and weapons, and prepare to be taken in tow. If I perceive any threat, I may destroy your ship and your persons at any time. The journey will take approximately ten hours."

"I understand." Mara nodded at Jennie, who grudgingly shut down the ship's small array of weaponry. Then Mara powered down the fusion drives and impellers, leaving only the backup generator for ship's power.

Short minutes later, two fighter-drones swooped in and clamped the *Swiftsure* between them.

"I'll take the first watch," Mara said.

"Fine. Nap time for Becker. You sure you even need to sit there?"

"I'm too keyed up to sleep. Maybe I can doze in the chair."

Jennie shrugged. "Suit yourself." She shut the door and dogged it, meticulous as ever.

* * *

Ten hours and two watch changes later, the displays showed *Swiftsure* approaching the fourth planet of the Miskor system. It was terraformed, just like each of the eight planets and many of the moons here, for the Opters liked to develop each of their systems to full capacity before expanding to the next. Historically, they created environments and maximized their existing territories rather than spreading and searching for green worlds the way humans usually did.

That was why their empire of a mere fifty to sixty systems had the effective industrial capacity of five hundred typical human systems, making the Opters, if not the equal of the Republic, then at least a rival to be reckoned with. Combine this with the fact that their subordinate creatures—the wasps, the ants, the dog-bees—required few comforts, with little need to waste resources on luxuries, and they definitely punched above their weight.

The towing fighter-drones guided *Swiftsure* to one of the nine medium-sized moons that orbited Miskor-4 like an engineered necklace of pearls, and down into a geodesic dome, one among thousands blanketing the surface of the planetoid. Its triangular flaps peeled back to let them enter an airlock arrangement, and closed behind them before more opened ahead.

When they landed, the atmosphere tested within human norms—not unexpected, as Opter air was close enough in composition to share for short periods. Jennie came along to bodyguard Mara—she adamantly refused to stay on the ship—and surprisingly, none of the Opters objected, nor did they even confiscate her many weapons.

Outside, on the bare rock of the landing pad, three ants and a warrior met and escorted them to an underground transport system. On the way Mara saw a spaceport teeming with workers and messengers—building, improving, maintaining. Intellectually she understood the Queen-nest-hive concept, everything in strict hierarchy—like a simpleton’s model of a military society, with no civilians and little flexibility—but emotionally, she found it hard to comprehend only Queens were really people with free will and the ability to direct their own lives.

It would be as if all of the natural humans were wealthy lords of their own domains, each with an army of Hok slaves to do their bidding. Slaves to build their devices, make their trade goods, earn their money and see to their every whim. Some of these lords would be concerned with their own intellectual pursuits, much as Old Earth aristocrats had expensive hobbies—collecting, hunting, researching, designing or creating art, perhaps. Others would spend their time in high society climbing the social ladder or in politics trying to gain power and status over others. They were like Roman senators with their lands, money and slaves—even appointments to command legions, for the distinction between government and military wasn’t so sharp back then.

Would such an existence be empty or full? Were Queens lonely or contented? The Opter males in their harems were reputed to be no more intelligent than warriors and about as interesting to talk to as a Hok. Did the Queens keep them that way to eliminate any challenge to their authority?

With their biological knowledge, Mara figured they could breed males of equal or even superior intelligence and ambitions—in turn creating smarter offspring.

But, as every insectoid Opter proceeded directly from eggs each Queen laid, perhaps they didn't want their offspring to be smarter than they were. Perhaps they wanted no challenges to their oligarchy.

Maybe that was why their society hadn't advanced significantly beyond humans, though so filled with wealth and promise. It was a society that gave the elite Queens nearly unlimited choices and the resources to implement them—a society that gave them every advantage.

Was it selfishness? Indulgence? Lack of vision? Or were they trapped in tradition, unable to break free of the chains of their own making?

These thoughts and more skittered through Mara's mind as she rode in a high-speed car in an underground tube, a trip of only ten minutes that nevertheless could have brought her almost anywhere within the moon.

When they debouched onto a platform, Jennie nudged her. "Look. Humans."

Mara saw a pair of humanoids—a man and a woman, clearly together. In fact, the woman seemed pregnant.

The man spotted the two outsiders and quickly led his partner away by the hand to vanish up a moving stairway.

"Probably humanopts," Mara said. "Interesting that they're here... but it might be a good sign, if this Queen breeds them and lets them run free in her society."

"I dunno. Creeps me out to see them bred like animals."

"They seemed happy enough. More so than some humans have been in our societies. We really have no idea, so don't start imagining some kind of heroic liberation. I get enough of that from my brother."

"Yet you're on your own quest here, to save the Rhinos from themselves. You really think that's so different?"

"Different as medicine and politics, Jennie my girl."

"Got it." Jennie ran her hands over her harness, instinctively checking her holstered weapons and neatly stowed equipment while keep her eyes

roving on the dozens of creatures in orderly activity around them. “Stick to the mission, and let you do the thinking.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about—”

Jennie moved suddenly—fast, faster than the warrior escorting them. She shoved Mara sideways off her feet and used the equal and opposite reaction to skitter to her own right. Quick-drawing her blaster, she fired. At the same time someone else fired at something.

That was all Mara had the mental clarity to perceive before fireworks seemed to explode all over the platform—stuttering flashes of blaster fire, the flat crack of wasp lasers, the zing of a needler, the thrum of stunners. Two louder blasts washed over Mara’s head as her survival instincts kicked in, and she rolled off into the tube cradle—below the line of fire.

She duck-walked sideways to hide her location and had already moved ten meters when two grenades tumbled over the lip where she’d first fallen. She faced away and wrapped herself into a ball—her back facing the bombs.

Focused by the tube, the concussions lifted and somersaulted her down the trough. Hot flame washed over her skin, and she felt her hair catch fire. Fortunately it was already short, and she slapped out the fire, but singed her palms to do it.

When she turned to look back it was all over. The shocking violence gave way to dull silence, made even quieter by the notable deafening of her auditory nerves. Alert wasps and ants swarmed hither and thither—crawling on the walls and ceiling. They poked into every crack and crevice, but none of them threatened her.

Then she saw Jennie limp into view. Her whole left side was shredded and burned. One eye and half her face was ripped apart like a ghastly haunted-house horror show, yet she was still on her feet—still operating. The single remaining eye fixed on Mara, and Jennie gave her the all-clear.

“How are you still on your feet?” Mara said as she rushed forward in doctor mode. “We need to get you to an infirmary.”

“I’m fine. The Bug is handling it.”

And Mara saw it was true. The Breaker Bug—the latest biotech—had already stopped the bleeding in all the areas not cauterized by heat. She could see at least eight separate weapon wounds on Jennie as well but nothing in the torso.

Mara also saw that she was firmly encased in a high-tech vest-plus—really a cuirass that covered her from groin to throat. It was only revealed now by the fact most of the vest and tunic had been torn away.

“Looks like somebody didn’t want you walking out of here alive,” Jennie rasped.

“I’d look kinda funny walking out of here dead.”

“Kinda like me, huh?” Jennie slurred. She reached up to put a fingertip through her own cheek and probe at her tongue, withdrawing a piece of shrapnel. “Anybody got any floss?”

“Bug or not, I need to run you through an autodoc. You may be on your feet, but I can help you get back to full capacity faster than the biotech alone.” That was the best argument Mara could think of—one she’d used on pigheaded warriors before.

“Fine. You got an autodoc?”

“No, but I’m sure the Miskor have something.”

An ant touched Mara’s elbow. “Come this way, please.”

“Our Queen has ordered extra security. There is no need for further concern,” another said.

Mara saw it was true—the extra security part, anyway. Their escort of four had ballooned to at least twenty, half of whom were warriors. The ants all seemed to be pointing portable sensors at everything and chittering in the Opter speech—passing short, sharp orders and reports.

For of course, Mara had taught herself the language long ago.

“Know your enemy” wasn’t only for warriors. Mara liked to know everything about everything, and talking to potential patients—or adversaries—was high on the list of things she needed to know.

Gently but firmly, they were marched down a passageway. “It was two humans—humanopts, I guess you’d say,” Jennie said under her breath as her one eye roved. “They threw grenades first, which was what saved our lives. Three seconds of delay was enough for me to nail one of them before he drew his blaster, and the wasp got the other when he started firing. If they’d fired first and hit their targets, they’d probably have nailed us.”

“Thank you, Jennie. For saving my life.”

“Likewise. I’d be dead without this shit in my veins.”

“Call it a team effort. But why did it happen?”

Jennie’s reply was cut off as Mara was led into the presence of a Queen. This time, four wasps made it clear Jennie would either have to give up her

weapons or stay outside the chamber. She elected to stay outside with the Opter guards.

“Friendly greetings,” the translator device around the neck of the deeply bronzed Queen said. “I am Broshnul, Queen of this Nest and the senior Miskor specialist in exobiology. Dreynel tells me you are interested in trading information.”

“Friendly greetings to you as well. I am Mara Straker. Will you address what just happened to my companion and me?”

“That was unfortunate. My servants and yours performed their functions—though yours did better than mine. That will be remedied. The evidence will be examined, and measures will be taken against the opposition.”

“Opposition? You have opposition within your own Nest?”

“Each Nest seeks to plant spies within others. Direct action such as just happened is unusual, but it does occur. Apparently someone does not want me to gain advantage from our contact.”

“These were humanopts, though. Right?”

“Physically, yes. What of it?”

“Doesn’t that suggest something? Maybe they’re from Terra Nova.”

Broshnul chittered more loudly, though her translator device still spoke in the same flat tone. “Terra Nova is its own Nest now, despite the impropriety of its manifestation. I did not misspeak. Do not seek to instruct me within my own Nest. Now, to the matter at hand. You wish to trade information.

“Yes, I’m looking to trade information—even perform research together if we can come to a mutual agreement.”

“Dreynel told me you offered her valuable military information as payment for this introduction. She has fulfilled her part of the bargain and demands you fulfill yours.”

“Of course. Allow me to connect with my ship.”

“You should have a channel.”

Mara instructed her comlink to handshake with her SAI—heavily encrypted of course—and to release the information to Dreynel on a message drone. She’d already given the junior queen the unlock codes for when the data arrived.

Mara returned her attention to Broshnul. “Did your fellow Queen explain my position? That I’m not part of the Republic?”

“Fellow? Hardly.” The translator lacked tone and nuance, but Mara could imagine a sneer. “Dreynel is an upstart, if a talented one—promoted to her position as the result of war casualties. You would do well to note my place and standing. I have granted you an interview because of your place and standing, but you seem to contradict yourself when you say you are not part of the Republic. Of what are you part?”

“How conversant are you with military affairs?”

“Vaguely. The militarists disgust me. The Sarmok’s war did our society great harm. The Miskor militarists are tolerable but only barely. The conflict disrupted many delicate experiments—not the least of which was the planet you call Terra Nova. If I were a vindictive person, I’d hold you and your sibling responsible for destroying hundreds of years of my work.”

“Your work? Terra Nova was yours?”

“Yes. Its rebellion has cost me dearly. I remain angry about it, but there is little to be done. Perhaps what I gain from you will make up for what I lost. Let us begin.”

“Fine.” Mara found the Queen’s ability to focus on the issue at hand admirable, but she herself wasn’t so cold-blooded. “First, though, I need to run my fellow human through your medical scanners and ensure any major physical issues are resolved.”

“You waste time.”

“We can talk as I do it, but I need to do it.”

“If that is necessary, do it as quickly as possible and return.” Broshnul made a gesture and the escort guided her to a small infirmary, relatively primitive by human standards. Mara knew Opter subordinates were usually either left to heal on their own, or be euthanized. Only in a small number of cases was it worth using resources to repair one rather than simply replace it.

But the ant helped her run Jennie through a full-body scanner and provided surgical tools to remove several pieces of shrapnel. There was a dangerous fragment lodged in Jennie’s lower back near the spine that would have put her out of commission for weeks—biotech or no biotech. She did it without anesthetic while Jennie grunted in pain, but she had little choice.

“Here, souvenir for you,” Mara said when she was finished, folding a jagged hunk of metal into Jennie’s palm. “A centimeter to the left and you’d have been paralyzed from the waist down—at least until I got you back to a real facility.”

“Thanks.” Jennie tossed it up and down. “I guess you’re not obsolete. Yet.”

“And I never will be—any more than you. Now lie flat and let me stitch you up. I can’t believe they’re still using suture. Maybe I can trade some actual medical tech, not just bio-research.”

“Good luck. These bugs are expendable to them.”

“Maybe I can make a resource-management argument.” Mara sewed her up, and then wrapped the wounds in clean bandages. “Stay there on your stomach for at least half an hour to let the healing set in. I’ll be back soon.”

In Broshnul’s chamber, Mara got straight to business, explaining what she needed and what she could provide. Once she adjusted to the Queen’s brusque and imperious manner, she found her easy to work with—straightforward and without all the distractions managing a team of human researchers usually entailed.

It was the beginning of long, successful weeks of exchanging research—very fruitful and satisfying. The time gave Jennie a chance to heal, even to practice her military craft with the wasps. It was the opportunity of a lifetime, she said. Mara only hoped that too much information hadn’t been given away, and that Broshnul wasn’t going to use her newfound knowledge against humanity... that she hadn’t made a huge mistake.

Only time would tell.

Chapter 24

Straker, aboard *Independence*, Premdor system

“So we’re agreed in principle?” Straker asked the senior staff around the table of the flag conference room. Jilani wasn’t there—deliberately. “We’re prepared to move against the Korveni in stages. We’ll keep an eye toward breaking their crimorg and freeing Utopia so we can settle there too and claim a real home. We can always change plans as we go if things get too hairy.”

Nods of assent came from the just-returned Engels, as well as Zaxby, Heiser, Winter and Gray. Chief Gurung grinned as he unsheathed his kukri and stropped it on his sleeve. “Ready for action, sir.”

Colonel Keller and Adriana the Ruxin business chief didn’t agree immediately.

“I’m concerned about our supply state,” Keller said. “It’s only been two months. We’re just starting to rebuild our fuel stocks with Delta Station coming online. *Battenberg* isn’t back yet from refit, so we’re still critically low on spare parts for mechsuits and ships. We’re cannibalizing everything. Even after she returns, we’ll need another month of hard work to become fully combat-ready.”

Adriana spoke up, much more assertive now that she was female. “General Straker, leaving Breaker Island now would severely disrupt our nascent economy. Our shops are bustling with people. Our infrastructure elements are improving across the board—water, sewer, power, comms and roads. The greenhouses are just starting to yield produce. With the Salamanders’ help we have plenty of fresh seafood, but we’ve almost used up our liquid credit with them. We need stability, sir.”

“I understand,” Straker said. “But from what Captain Jilani says, we won’t need our whole force against the Korveni. They’re pirates and raiders, not a government with a fleet. We’ll take a picked force and wipe out their main base. Then, we’ll head straight for Utopia and liberate Jilani’s people. If everything looks good, we can pull out of Premdor in an orderly fashion and relocate to Utopia permanently.”

The two holdouts exchanged glances. “If that’s the decision, my people will make it happen, sir,” Colonel Keller said. “...but we’ll be stretched to the limit to put your ‘picked force’ in the field.”

“Adriana?”

The Ruxin fanned her subtentacles. “The longer we stay in one place, the better. I dread the disruption when we move, but if we can transfer in an orderly fashion, I will exert my utmost efforts to create positive economic growth. The cash flow and internal barter imbalances alone are creating tensions within the business community. I am, however—”

Straker cut her off, for Ruxins tended to be long-winded if given the opportunity to discuss their own specialty. “Adriana—can you do it?”

“Suboptimal, but I will manage.”

“Good.” Straker gave the group one more glance. “Get working on it. I want your plans on my desk in forty-eight hours. Dismissed.”

Colonel Winter shifted over to sit by Straker as the rest drifted out of the room, already discussing the next steps in their respective functional areas. “I take it you’ll be leading this picked force?”

Straker sat back, eyeing his mechsuit commander. “Planning on it. You object?”

“No, sir. I’m more interested in who you’re leaving in charge here.”

“Admiral Engels, now that she’s back.”

Winter relaxed. “Good.”

“Good?”

“It’s not Straker’s Breakers without a Straker at the helm. Eventually, your children will—”

“I’m not trying to start a dynasty here, Martin,” Straker said sharply.

Winter’s expression remained bland. “Maybe you should.”

Straker’s eyes narrowed. “When the time comes, someone else will take over the Breakers. Whoever’s right for the job... but that won’t be for a few decades, unless I happen to get capped early. What’s really bothering you?”

“Sir, you don’t see the strain the civilians are under. They haven’t recovered from being uprooted once. They need stability and someone to look to—and frankly, sir, democracy is a luxury. We’re both students of history. What’s been the most effective, stable type of government in human history, especially under great strain?”

Straker took a deep breath, let it out, giving himself time to think. “A strong monarchy with established laws and traditions. Assuming the monarch is competent and benevolent. Everybody loves a good king... or queen.”

“Exactly. You need to be the king. Derek the First of Utopia.”

“Sounds idiotic.”

“So find another name. King Derek of House Straker. Grand Marshal Straker of the Breaker Empire. Derek Caesar. Doesn’t matter. Both sides need tradition—the military and the civilians—and you need to be a symbolic father to your people. Best to start sooner than later. I don’t mean to criticize, but...”

“But you’re about to anyway. Go ahead. We’re grownups here, Colonel. Hell, you’re older than I am. Give it to me straight.”

Winter folded his hands on the table in front of him. “I think we all hoped the Liberator would take over leading humanity and set things right when he had a chance. And he didn’t.”

“I didn’t, you mean.”

Winter nodded, his face bleakly sympathetic.

“Fair enough. Go on.”

“You let things drift, sir, hoping the politicians would magically transform the Republic into a place of freedom and prosperity. Instead, they did what they always do—screwed the people. The price of freedom is constant vigilance. We didn’t remain vigilant. I don’t want to see that happen all over again. You know history, sir. Power abhors a vacuum. If a good person doesn’t exert leadership, others will step in and steal everything.”

Straker considered. “The downfall of monarchies is always in the transition to the next ruler. The throne becomes the prize in a game of politics.”

“You said yourself that won’t be for decades. With Murdock’s rejuvenation tank, you might rule for centuries.”

“That sounds like its own kind of hell.”

“But it gives you options, sir. Abdicate in favor of someone else as competent as you are—in your own timing. You’ll always be there to grab the reins if things fall apart later. Isn’t that what the constitutional Liberator position was supposed to be in the Republic?”

Straker drummed his fingers on the tabletop. “All right. I’ll think about it.”

“Please do more than think, sir. *Tempus fugit.*”

“Time flees indeed....and the tide of history waits for no man when it turns.” Straker reached out to grasp Winter’s shoulder for a moment as he stood. “Thanks, Martin. And about the op... assuming I take mechsuits, the

Guard will form the basis for my ground force—not First Bat. I’ll take the Hok marines but leave Cadre. I’ll need a few of your people as replacement pilots. You pick.”

“Anything I can do, sir.”

“Of course. See you later.”

* * *

Straker spent the rest of the daytime hours familiarizing himself with the enemy. Jilani had provided a vast, disorganized data dump of everything she knew about the various crimorgs around the Middle Reach. Indy had processed it, and Sinden was analyzing the relevant sections on the Korveni. He’d ordered her to brief the staff after dinner.

If her intel was accurate, Jilani was a one-woman wrecking crew—raiding Korveni facilities, ambushing their ships, passing free information to their criminal enemies. She hit other crimorgs from time to time but mainly for profit—which she plowed back into her guerilla war against the Korveni. When she did, she always made it appear that some other gang had done it.

So, he thought, she’s motivated. Doesn’t mean she’s trustworthy and honest, but it does mean as long as her interests and the Breakers’ aligned, she’d make a good ally. She’d certainly provided valuable information up until now.

Straker met his wife and children for dinner in their quarters—a ritual he and Carla tried to maintain in all but emergencies. He was surprised to see Mara there. She must have just returned, and she hugged him hard—a fierce, triumphant smile on her face. All the while Katie tugged at his hand and Johnny solemnly took the other.

“Good to see you back from the Opters, sis,” Derek said, effortlessly lifting both his children into his arms and talking past them. “I know that look. You got what you wanted.”

“I did—and more. The Miskor Queen I worked with assures me the biotech I got will cure the Rhinos. The report should be on your desk.”

“It’ll keep until morning. You can hit the high points when we sit down. For now...” He motorboated his children’s cheeks in turn, bringing forth shrieks of childish laughter.

“Daddy, stop it!” Katie commanded, pointing imperiously. “You’re bothering Johnny.”

“Bothering Johnny, huh? Well, maybe I should be bothering *you!*” He swung them both around like a human carnival ride and then tumbled gently together onto the play-mat to wrestle on the floor.

When playtime was over and they had taken their seats at the dinner table, Carla handed the adults flutes of champagne. “To reunions. Welcome home, Mara.”

“Thanks, Carla. It’s good to be back.”

“*I* want some champagne,” Katie declared.

“Not until you’re older, punkin,” Derek said. “Mara, so... you have a new biotech for the Rhinos. How’re you going to convince them to infect themselves with it?”

“I’m not. It’s highly contagious, and it’s subtle enough they shouldn’t even notice until they wonder why the birthrate is declining and their aggressiveness is normalized.”

“Normalized?” Carla asked sharply. “Sounds like you’re playing god with sentient biology, just like the Opters did with humans—messing with their minds and bodies without their consent.”

Mara glared. “I’m a doctor, sworn to do no harm. This is a cure, not a disease.”

“Administered without consent.”

“As a society, the Rhinos are *non compos mentis*. They’re not in their right minds. This is no different from committing a mentally ill person to a facility and forcing treatment on them, just on a grand scale. This will restore them to how they were before, nothing more. Oh, except they’ll be healthier all the way to the end of their longer lives—as originally intended by their own researchers.”

“I’m still not comfortable with it,” Carla said.

Mara slammed her empty flute down. If it wasn’t made of unbreakable crystal, it would’ve shattered. “These are the people who nuked *one hundred million* of their own—in order to reduce their population pressure. Then they lied and claimed we did it in their public media. I think correcting that madness outweighs *comfortable*.”

“And though I understand Carla’s reservations,” Derek said mildly, “I have to agree. This is necessary... as long as you’re sure the biotech cure will work as advertised.”

“I tested the science in simulations. I’ll turn it over to Murdock for an independent evaluation, and Indy can run her own tests. Once we’ve done that...do the Salamanders have any Rhino prisoners we could test it on?”

“I’ll ask.”

Carla frowned at that, but kept her silence. Derek hoped she realized this was an extraordinary situation. Sometimes, principles had to bend to practicality—or to higher principles. He recalled the words of one revered Old Earth statesman—something to the effect that if principles lead to destruction, principles must bend.

“Daddy, why is Mommy mad at Aunt Mara?” Johnny asked, his eyes large with impending tears.

“She’s not mad, silly,” Katie countered. “She *dis-ap-proves*.” She said this with a pompous gravity only a child could muster.

“My, what an enormous word for a six-year-old,” Mara said.

“Especially for one who’s not a brainiac,” Derek said. “*You* were reading medical school texts at six.”

Mara ignored Derek. “And you’re very perceptive, Katie. Mommy *disapproves* of something we’re talking about doing, but she’s not *angry* with me. I’m sure you disapprove of things from time to time, but it doesn’t mean you’ve gotten angry.”

“I disapprove of *brussels sprouts*.” Katie made a face as she poked the pieces on her plate. “And bedtime.”

The adults dissolved into laughter.

“I dis-prove bedtime too,” Johnny said. “And Missy Tomkins. She’s a mean girl.”

“Don’t worry, Johnny,” Katie said earnestly. “I’ll protect you.”

Derek eyed Carla. “I think it’s time to start the kids in Kung Jiu.”

“I won’t have them programmed to be warriors, Derek,” Carla snapped. “We both had enough of that growing up.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it—but the martial arts aren’t solely about self-defense. As you know.”

Carla waved off the impending argument. “I know. Sorry. How about we enjoy our dinner and not talk about controversial stuff right now?”

Derek knew she meant in front of the kids. “Sounds good. You both going to make the 1930 briefing?” he asked, checking his chrono.

They both signaled assent.

Carla pointed with her fork, a brussels sprout on its tines. “I guess what bothers me is this idea we’ll keep doing mercenary jobs for other people—like we’re enforcers, guns for hire.”

“We are,” Derek replied. “But if we’re smart and careful, we can pick and choose jobs we approve of.”

Johnny studied his food, and then aimed a finger-gun at a brussels sprout. “*Pew! Pew pew!*”

Carla hushed him and said, “But look at our situation now. We wanted a simple one-and-done. Now we’re embroiled in alien politics.”

“All the more reason to have our own homeland. One we control.”

She sighed. “I know. Before...them,” she gestured at the kids, “I lived for battle. Not the killing or destruction but for the challenge, the tactics, the clean chess game of it all. Not like your messy ground combat. Then we had these two, and five years of real life on Culloden... Now it all seems so muddled.”

“You’ve changed, Carla. We both have. You’re a mother, I’m a father...” Derek looked away. “A father to my people, Martin said I am—should be. So I get it. We made glorious careers out of knocking things down. Now, we want to build something.”

“We built something on Culloden, and it got taken from us, Derek. How can we be sure this won’t too?”

Derek picked up Carla’s hand in both of his own. “Nothing’s sure in life. But I promise you, we’ll have a real home. A place of our own, one we’ll defend.”

Johnny giggled. “Are you gonna kiss each other?”

“No they’re not,” Katie declared.

“Yes we are,” Derek replied, leaning across to kiss Carla tenderly and murmur, “Remember, my lioness, there’s a time for lying in the sun, and there’s a time to fight for your cubs—or go hunting.”

* * *

The 1930 briefing in the CCC saw Commander Sinden lay out the Korveni organization. “They have one main base on a planetoid in this nebula,” she said, bringing up graphics in the holotank. “It’s well hidden, but Captain Jilani assures me her intel is accurate. With its precise location

and because there's no nearby star to curve space, we can transit straight in to within weapons range and attack immediately."

"Why would anyone build in a place where someone could transit right in?" Loco asked. "No curved-space buffer means no warning."

"As long as the location remains secret, it makes for much faster operations," Sinden replied. "It cuts hours or days off travel. The Korveni have a fleet of about twenty corsairs, small ships ranging from courier size up to frigate class. They can't stand against more than one heavy cruiser, and we'll have three available if we leave our two operational DNs here to protect Premdor and Breaker Island. The problem is, the Korveni can transit out as soon as they bring up their sidespace generators. We have to assume at least one of them will get away."

"To where?" Straker asked. He already knew the answer from his studies, but it provided Sinden a segue.

"They have five smaller bases in star systems where there's no effective government. If we think there's been no warning, we'll hit those immediately afterward to try to completely destroy the Korveni organization. If they do get off a courier or drone, we'll head straight for Utopia and worry about their small bases later. Utopia is their next largest base, and their most important, economically—their prize jewel."

"If it's so juicy, why hasn't it been attacked or taken by some other organization?" Loco asked.

"There's a fascinating, multi-part answer to that question," Sinden said, her usually emotionless face lighting up with wonder. "First, it's hidden—hard to find."

"What's hard to find about a star and a planet?" Loco scoffed. "You can see stars from across the length of the galaxy."

"Yes—if they're not shielded." Sinden waved her cursor and the holotank graphics changed. When next she spoke, it was with a tone of near-reverence, as if speaking of a holy object. "By a Dyson cylinder."

Straker, forewarned, didn't gasp in wonder the way many of the staff did. He watched Jilani, who sat relaxed with her arms crossed under her ample breasts. She smiled in satisfaction as Sinden revealed the surprise.

"A Dyson cylinder is only theoretical," Zaxby said, sitting forward and focusing all four eyes on the holotank. "Until now, I see. Stunning."

"Wait, wait. What's a Dyson cylinder?" Loco asked.

“It’s a variant of a construct named for an Old Earth physicist—the Dyson sphere,” Sinden said. “Enclose a star completely in a massive globe. Depending on how it’s made, you might capture all its energy, inhabit its interior or exterior surface, even fill it with an atmosphere. Doing so might even hide the existence of the star itself from many sensors. But a sphere is probably the most difficult engineering construct, and there are advantages to using a smaller, narrower cylinder instead.”

“Like a giant hab wrapped around a star,” Straker said. He’d been waiting to use that visual shortcut ever since he reviewed the info.

“Correct, sir,” Sinden said, activating the graphic. The wheel-like cylinder enclosing the star began to spin like an orbital habitat, though much more slowly. “Unlike a sphere, where spin would cause everything to flow downslope toward the equator, a cylinder provides a vast interior surface, functionally flat to those inside.”

“How vast?” Engels asked. “A cylinder the size of a planetary orbit beggars belief.”

“That is true, ma’am. There are no known materials that could stand the strain of spin, if built to that scale. A typical Goldilocks Zone planetary orbit radius might be 100,000,000 kilometers, to choose a nice round number. The technology needed to build such a thing would be millenia ahead of ours. Fortunately, this construct is far smaller—though still huge.” She zoomed in and activated a scale next to the graphic.

“Only 20,200 kilometers in radius,” Zaxby said. “Approximately five thousand times smaller than your example, yet still the largest habitat I’ve ever seen. With a width of approximately 10,000 kilometers, it should contain the usable surface area of ten planets in one convenient location. Quite reasonable, very useful. But a Dyson construct implies a star at the center. There is no star class known small enough to fit inside.”

“But there *is* a star inside,” Jilani said, leaning forward. “I saw it as a little girl. It provided heat and light like any other sun. There’s a moon that makes tides. Obviously, whoever built Utopia was far more advanced than we are. They must’ve figured out how to create a mini-star system that mimics a normal planetary day and night.”

“And Utopia was uninhabited when you landed?” Engels asked.

“Only animals and plants—a functioning ecosystem, reasonably fit for humans or other oxygen-breathers. I do remember trouble with animals. We had to move the first settlement.”

“An environment fit for humans? Some coincidence.”

Jilani shrugged. “I seem to recall when we landed it was cold compared to Seconda Venezia, but that was twenty years ago. I don’t remember the details, or whether the seasons change... All I know is, what’s left of my people, my family, is there—and they grow Erbaccia for the Korveni. Maybe the builders were similar to humans—or Ruxin, for that matter.”

“Yes,” Zaxby said, “it’s more likely that a large-brained aquatic species like ours would evolve enough to create such an advanced structure—and a water-oxygen environment is the most common underpinning of planetary life. And, it’s possible there’s an automated system that adapts to the inhabitants.”

“So, less coincidence than you might think,” said Sinden with a frown. “In practical terms, however, it doesn’t matter. I suggest our concern is with the facts as they stand, rather than theories regarding how those facts came to be.”

“One hell of a prize,” Colonel Keller said. “One habitat, worth ten green planets, concentrated in one system. That’s vast economic wealth—and hardly anybody knows about it. It can’t be seen at a distance, and it’s small enough that you won’t find it on gravitic scans unless you’re specifically looking for it. Sir,” she turned to Straker, “this would serve all our needs ten thousand times over.”

“But others will covet it,” Commodore Gray said. “If we destroy the Korveni as an organization, but even *one* of them escapes with the knowledge, they’ll sell the information and we’ll have pirates and colonizers showing up within a few months.”

“Very few know,” Jilani said. “I’m sure the location of Utopia is a closely guarded secret for exactly that reason—any of the Korveni could sell the info and become rich by themselves. Only one ship travels there every couple of months, and only the captain and the pilot have the coordinates. It took me years to find it, and I knew it existed and what to look for. If we do it right, we can contain the knowledge. If we don’t... isn’t this worth fighting for and defending?”

“It is,” said Straker. “We can’t give up before we even start just because it’s risky—but I do need everyone involved to plan carefully, to mitigate the risks. I know enough about the Korveni to know that every member deserves to die. This isn’t some government from above, where the little people are powerless to stop the evil outside their own reach. Every

Korveni is party to murder, enslavement, trafficking in sentients and addictive drugs, piracy—every way you can victimize someone, they do it. So, the plans you come up with will be no-holds-barred, all-out war.”

“They’ll have slaves with them on their ships and bases,” Engels said. “Innocents—children even.”

Straker’s face turned grave as a stone. “I’m truly sorry about that. If we can rescue them, we will. But not at the expense of failure, or letting any Korveni escape. There are thousands, maybe tens of thousands, of Jilani’s people to be freed. That’s our primary objective. Commander Sinden, proceed with the briefing. Once we’re done, let’s plan for operational kickoff in two weeks.”

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Chapter 25

Straker, aboard armed transport *Caribou*, Korveni base

Straker brainlinked with his Jackhammer ten minutes prior to transit into the Korveni's main hidden base. This ensured he'd be ready to give orders as soon as *Caribou*, the armed transport he rode in, appeared from sidespace.

He and the rest of the Breakers were taking a risk, arriving together in a relatively small area of space around the Korveni planetoid—but transiting in piecemeal seemed a bigger risk. Simultaneity and surprise were more important than avoiding the possibility of collision with friendly ships.

When *Caribou* popped in and Straker's HUD feed showed him the situation, adrenaline surged through his veins and he clenched his fists involuntarily. Fortunately, his mechsuit was locked down and its movement disabled.

The three Breaker cruisers, with Commodore Gray in the lead commanding *Samarah*, were already firing. They vomited forth precious shipkiller missiles even as they lined up and slammed particle beams into the biggest Korveni ships. With them, twelve Ruxin skimmers performed the functions normally reserved for frigates and corvettes—attacking smaller vessels.

Except for full-on fleet actions, traditional naval tactics dictated that warships always tried to engage vessels of the same or smaller class. It had been this way from the time of Old Earth sailing ships until now. In a perfect ship-to-ship melee, cruisers tried to engage frigates, frigates tried to engage corvettes—and corvettes hunted couriers, attack craft and drones.

Unfortunately, the Breakers had no frigates or corvettes—a matter of heated discussion among the naval officers. In the end they had armed and uprated six transports as faux frigates and drafted twelve skimmers as corvettes.

But the transports weren't real frigates, and the skimmers weren't real corvettes, so they'd come up with the solution to work in pairs like old-fashioned manned aerospace fighters.

Straker's HUD showed him thirteen Korveni ships in space and several on the ground powering up. Those would have to lift off before transiting

out—in fact, the tiny zone of curved space extended one or two kilometers above the planetoid’s surface, due to its gravity.

The Korveni ships were unusual in one respect—they fought obliquely, rather than nose-on like human ships. They fired broadsides of smaller weaponry, rather than heavy shots with large spinal projectors. This made the Korveni less effective against pure warships but more flexible and better against armed civilians, privateers and other general-purpose enemies—their prey.

It also meant they could evade more effectively, dodging obliquely while still maintaining full fields of fire. It was a generalist’s approach rather than the specialized punch of the Breaker cruisers.

They also had one favorite tech, that they prioritized above all others: the ability to board in open space, making them effective pirates. This involved getting close enough to an enemy and using a powerful magnetic beam to grapple—in combination with hard shields to handle the forcible collision. Once the ships locked together, the large Korveni crews would assault and seize their prizes—adding those to their fleet and the enemy crews to their slave pens.

Within a minute, Straker’s HUD dissolved into a swirl of battling ships. The Korveni didn’t know they were beaten from the start and reacted with predictable vicious aggression, charging directly for their enemies. One of the enemy frigates staggered, pummeled and holed by a Breaker cruiser, yet she nevertheless seized the *Caribou* in her magnetic grip and lay alongside to grapple.

Straker felt the shudder of the two ships crashing together even as he transferred his attention to his immediate surroundings. He released the clamps holding his mechsuit in place within the cargo bay and the suit came alive. Suddenly, instead of being a god with a grand perspective in space, he became a large metal man locked in a small metal room with three other metal men—and a bunch of heavily armed metal imps like action figures, the Ripper battlesuits of his attendant Hok.

Fighting off boarders—not what I expected, Straker thought. He’d figured the ground troops would be set down on the planetoid in order to assault the base, destroy the defenses, kill Korveni and rescue those they could—but now the Korveni turned the tables.

So be it.

“Open the cargo bay doors, one meter wide,” he comlinked on the bridge channel. “Better to let them inside.”

No acknowledgement came, but a moment later the big double doors opened slightly in the middle, stopping at about one meter. The three Guard Jackhammers with him crouched slightly with the natural body movements of their pilots, gauntlets aimed toward the opening like men readying for a Kung Jiu match. The Hok marines took positions around the perimeter in three dimensions.

Movement showed at the crack, then Korveni battlesuiters poured in like a swarm of man-seized insects. They were humanoid, but their suits had blades and projections on them and were highly individualized with garish paint, gilding and chrome highlights.

Straker waited a moment, letting the others fire their weapons first. Inevitably, there were leakers, and he concentrated on snapshotting those who sneaked by the phalanx of fire. The Breakers cut down dozens of surprised Korveni within seconds.

But it wasn't all one way. At least one of the enemy had carried a bomb of some sort—a huge grenade or charge that exploded near a bulkhead and blew three Hok to bits. As usual, though, mechsuits were proof against all but the heaviest weaponry, proving their worth once again.

As soon as the initial boarding assault waned, Straker comlinked, “Open the bay doors full.” When they began widening he moved carefully forward, cognizant of the confined quarters—until he emerged into open space. Stepping out with magnetics activated, he walked around the curve of the hull until he could see the Korveni frigate.

The two ships were a match in size, but the Korveni vessel was much more heavily armed and armored than the *Caribou*. Fortunately, the enemy frigate was mangled badly, with large slagged holes and most of her turrets destroyed by cruiser fire.

Most of them. One turret was still active and swung toward him—its laser waveguide turning like a rifle as its operator detected him.

Its armor was heavier than any heavy tank—warships simply built everything bigger than ground vehicles could—but the real value of a mechsuit was its pilot, its precision. Straker, his brainlinked SAI and training flowing perfectly, lined up his aiming reticle on the base of the waveguide and triggered a force-cannon bolt.

He could *feel* the magnetic tube extend from his weapon even as the capacitors discharged their energy and the bimetallic wafer dissolved, providing a sun-hot jet of plasma which shot arrow-straight in a glowing line from his fist to his target. It sliced the wand-like structure in half, and when the Korveni laser mechanism fired, its unguided beam dispersed harmlessly—except to itself. The coherent light’s disrupted exit melted and sparked, shattering the weapon to uselessness.

“Spread out and hunt active weapons on the hull,” he told his three fellow mechsuiters. “Hok, counterattack into their ship and let us know if you run into anything you can’t handle.” He’d take his Jackhammer into the Korveni ship if he had to, but he was much more comfortable out on the hull, with room to work.

Five minutes later, all the turrets were silenced and the Hok squads had cleared the Korveni ship of enemies. They reported at least twenty noncombatants—evidently slaves that had survived and were now pleading for rescue.

“Delta squad, remain aboard for security. Captain Desautel, send over some spacers as prize crew and take control. Help the friendlies as you can, but stay vigilant. We’re re-boarding *Caribou*—head out as soon as you’re ready.”

Clamped into the cargo bay again, Straker turned his attention to the overall battle. Several Korveni hulls drifted, powerless. More had managed to grapple Breaker ships, but all of those attempts had been defeated—defeated by foreknowledge and careful preparation. Every Breaker ship was chock-full of marines. Automated add-on antipersonnel weaponry was welded to the bulkheads at every intersection. The Korveni assaults, so fearsome to the unprepared, were brutally shredded by entrenched defenders—and immediately the other Breakers counterattacked and seized the Korveni vessels as Straker himself had.

Even the lightly armed skimmers were bolstered with defenses, but none of them needed the help. They simply skipped into underspace with SAI speed when an enemy tried to grapple, moved away and reappeared firing.

Two skimmers were heavily damaged by direct fire, though, and would have to be repaired or strapped on for recovery and transit, but Straker considered this a small price to pay. Surprise and preparation had won the day.

“Straker to Gray. Any Korveni get away?”

“Happy to say no, General. We had a scare when one corvette tried to transit out with a skimmer grappled to her, but her generators overloaded and she stayed here.”

Zaxby’s voice broke in. “I must point out that this was my own skimmer, the *Darter*, under my command. It is now quite severely damaged because of my heroic actions. The enemy corvette tried to ungrapple, but in a brilliant stroke of genius, I routed my own reinforcement field through my superconductors to create a powerful magnetic grapple of my own, holding fast to the Korveni in order to keep it from escaping. In fact, I’d go as far as to say I have again saved the day, and I expect songs and poems and festivals in my honor—”

“Oh, sorry Zaxby, you’re breaking up,” Straker said, talking loudly over the top of the Ruxin’s interruption. “Commodore Gray, transmit a surrender demand to the Korveni base and prep for ground assault. Straker out.”

He switched channels to the *Caribou*’s bridge. “Desautel, as soon as the commodore clears it, put us on the ground.”

“Aye, sir.”

“General Straker, Gray here. The Korveni say they’ll kill all their prisoners if we don’t withdraw.”

“We can’t worry about that now. Hit them fast and hard, balls to the wall, and clear us a safe landing zone. The best we can do now is smash them so fast they don’t have time to think about atrocities. Isolate any prison areas or slave pens if you can, but the key is to blitz them fast.”

“Understood. Gray out.”

Straker watched fire fall from the sky upon the dry, rocky planetoid and its sprawling base. There weren’t many turrets or missile launchers. The Korveni relied on speed and ferocity, not fixed defenses. Gray’s cruisers used their secondary weaponry to carve the complex up into sections, trying to isolate areas that might contain large numbers of the innocent.

“All transports—we’ve wiped out all their ADA,” Gray said on the general channel. “You’re cleared hot to land.”

Straker saw the armed transports were already descending to land in a ring. His HUD map was continuously populating with information, highlighting enemy battle formations and presumed noncombatant areas. As soon as the *Caribou* touched down, her cargo bay doors swung open and he leaped out onto the airless surface.

Above him wisps of nebula gas glowed which turned the sky to a rainbow rife with color—color his HUD usually filtered out when showing him the space battle. By contrast the surface was monochrome and painted in shades of black, white and gray.

The domes and sealed buildings of the base were the exception. They were decorated with a colorful variety of grim motifs—alien skulls drenched in blood, faces contorted in pain or rage, murals of Korveni attacking and seizing ships and pornographic pictures of Korveni with many species.

Straker noted all this in passing as he bounded toward the nearest concentration of enemy. Small-arms fire sparkled from around and atop the steel-shod buildings, and he put a force-cannon bolt into its nearest viewport. The other viewports exploded outward as everything inside flash-ignited. After that, he concentrated on picking off any suited Korveni outside, punching short gatling bursts into each armored thug.

His three Jackhammers followed, as did the Hok and the Ruxin warrior-marines. They needed no further orders to sweep inward toward the center just as the other six mechsuit-battlesuit teams from the other transports did. The Jackhammers smashed the opposition while the marines mopped up.

The Korveni simply didn't possess anything that could stand against mechsuits—as expected. They particularly didn't have anything to stand against a monstrous four-armed, four-legged mechsuit like Zaxby's, which Straker met as he arrived in the middle of the base.

"You're not supposed to be here, Zaxby," Straker said, annoyed by the Ruxin's glory-hounding. "You did great with your skimmer, but here, you're nothing but in the way. Let the professionals handle it."

"The *Darter* is incapacitated. You ordered a maximum assault, so I heeded your call to battle. Balls to the wall, you said."

"Do you have balls, Zaxby?" Straker turned restlessly, searching for further targets.

"I have organs that function in roughly the same manner—"

"Then kindly remove them from your mechsuit, and make yourself useful since you're here. Take charge of the Ruxin marines, and search the base for survivors."

"Happily, Liberator. Do you want Korveni prisoners if we are able to capture any? They might have information."

Straker chewed his lip for a moment. “No. They’re all condemned to death. No mercy. If your people don’t want to issue the *coup de grace* themselves, hand them over to the Hok for immediate execution.”

“Oh, we Ruxins will happily execute your orders—along with any Korveni.” Zaxby paused, a smirk in his voice. “Did you notice my clever wordplay? I said *execute*—”

“I got it. It just wasn’t that funny. Get to work.”

“You’re no fun. You really ought to lighten up now that we have won. Oh, that rhymes! I—”

Zaxby’s monologue was interrupted by a sudden blast. One of the domes had gone up in an explosion that demolished a tenth part of the base. Several Hok and Ruxin marine transponders went offline.

Straker growled, “Looks like some Korveni booby-trapped something. You still having fun, Zaxby? Because it’s not over till it’s over. Now get your ass in gear—and be careful. Rescue anyone you can and leave the rest. We’ll burn this base down to bedrock from space after we’re done.”

“Aye aye, Liberator sir. Though I would like to say—”

“*Get moving, War Male!*” Straker roared.

“I’ll ride herd on him, boss” Loco comlinked in Straker’s ear. “Maybe you should cut back on the caff, though.”

“Thanks, Loco. Good work.” Straker took a deep breath to calm himself and then switched to the general channel. “Good work, everyone. We’re almost done.”

Over a hundred prisoners were rescued from the Korveni base. Searchers reported as many captives killed—collateral damage—but Straker refused to let himself feel any guilt. He had smashed the Korveni, and those prisoners who weren’t set free were mercifully dead.

Better death than to live as a hopeless slave in the Korveni pens, destined for a hellish life ending in dismemberment and kitchen-bound...for the Korveni were inveterate carnivores and had no compunctions against dining on sentients.

Technically, it wasn’t cannibalism.

Technically.

Still, it roiled his guts as bad as the underground slaughter-factories on Terra Nova.

When Straker inspected the base, he saw the Korveni bodies and thought to himself that if ever there were real monsters, these were they.

The creatures were all teeth and spines—cruel, heartless predators, but lacking the clean ruthlessness of an animal who simply needed to eat.

Korveni gloried in the pain of others, taking sadistic joy in the worst vices imaginable and were always on the lookout for helpless victims. The one nearest him had died with its claws in the guts of a rag-doll figure, a humanoid girl of seven or eight—terror still etched on her face.

He ordered the child's remains removed from her tormentor and laid to rest alongside a dead woman of the same species. The image stayed with him for a long time.

Straker wasn't leaving the base intact. In fact, he used a nuke on it, carefully emplaced below the surface for maximum destruction, as a statement in case any far-flung Korveni ships returned.

With luck, they'd be out of fuel and stranded forever.

The nuke buried the dead together, innocent and guilty alike, along with the last shred of sympathy he might have had for those of Korveni blood. If ever an entire race were wholly damned, it was this.

* * *

Straker allowed twelve hours to make repairs, deal with the rescued beings—all from environments close to human or Ruxin—and get ready for the next phase of the operation. There'd been some argument in favor of returning to Premdor to repair and replenish, but that would lose time. Instead, the Breakers split into five smaller forces to raid the other Korveni bases and meet at Utopia in four days.

Never change what you don't need to, Straker mused. It just invites mistakes.

On the two sidespace jumps, Straker had time to take a look at the freed captives, who were pitifully grateful. There were at least twenty different types of aliens, mostly humanoid or even human. Those more suited to aquatic environments, including two Ruxins, were quartered aboard the skimmers.

Those rescued seemed to be stunned, pitiful, haunted. Many had to be sedated by the limited medical staff pending more extensive measures—brain rebalancing, therapy, counseling, rehabilitation. It brought home to Straker the height and weight of the responsibility he now bore.

At one time he'd been responsible for all of humanity for what seemed like a brief moment, but this little slice and these few people seemed much more real to him. Men, women with babies, traumatized children. They gathered around, begging to thank him for their freedom, touching his clothing reverently or simply breaking down in tears.

Their gratitude brought tears to his own eyes, and it was so moving and painful, that he had to leave them in the hands of the medics, as kindly as possible, but firmly. He thought of himself as a hard but humane man, but this... these people crystallized those parts of himself further.

That resolve made the next battle, an easy one to destroy the Korveni sub-base, even more satisfying.

It felt like righteousness—pure justice.

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Chapter 26

Straker at Utopia

The Breaker task forces rejoined near the Utopia Dyson cylinder—Straker could hardly call it a “star system” with its micro-star within a giant hab. He shuttled from *Caribou* to *Samarah*, which was Gray’s command cruiser—rather than observing from within his suit brainlink-cyberspace.

The mass of the tiny star and the hab together created enough curved space to push sidespace arrivals out to a distance of an hour’s travel. That meant no surprise attack but also gave him time to confer with Gray for the final approach.

Samarah’s bridge wasn’t built for managing multiple ships, but it was crammed with extra personnel and put to work doing it anyway. Watchstanders and officers squeezed into every corner, flinging orders through comlinks and augs plugged into their brainlinks. They made way for Straker who stepped to Gray’s left shoulder as she occupied her captain’s chair.

“The beaters are moving to their positions,” Gray said. “We’re coming in with sensors and weapons hot.”

“I see,” Straker said as he examined the holotank. The “beaters”—like those who beat the bushes to scare up game animals and drive them to the guns of the hunters—were the three cruisers and six armed transports. The transports had extra emitters to convince any onlookers that they were also cruisers. The nine ships had arrived in a hemisphere, all on one side of the cylinder.

Deliberately.

“Two Korveni ships,” Gray said as her Sensors officer pushed the data feed to the holotank and two icons appeared, one red, one orange. “Rather, one ship and one local defense cruiser—a mini-monitor, according to Jilani. No sidespace engines—just extra armor and weaponry.”

“The *Mangler*, they call it,” Jilani said, standing at Gray’s right. “Nasty and tough, according to the info I gave you. Can you handle it?”

Gray lifted one eyebrow in amusement. “If your information was accurate, we’ll be fine. The Korveni have never fought a genuine professional military force before. Nasty and tough to other pirates is routine for the Breakers. These are former Hundred Worlds ships, the best

humanity's ever built, made for one thing: to kill other ships and live to tell about it."

"Just don't get complacent."

Gray held her tongue, and Straker refrained from rebuking Jilani. Her mouthiness bordered on disrespect, but she was only a provisional Breaker and not part of the military. Maybe that was better in the long run. Protocol could get in the way of useful frankness.

"I'm sure Commodore Gray will execute her orders with her usual excellence," Straker said mildly. "Will their frigate join the *Mangler* in fighting?"

"*Probilamente no*," Jilani replied. "Not two against nine. If they knew it was more like two against three, they might."

"She's right," Gray said. "Look, the frigate's running."

The Korveni frigate was the only sidespace-capable ship allowed to visit the golden goose of Utopia. The holotank showed the *Mangler* moving to interpose while the frigate accelerated in the other direction. She skimmed close to the cylinder and arrowed out fast directly away from the threat—heading for flatspace and escape.

"I love it when my enemies have no imagination," Gray muttered. "Do we have friendly transponders?"

"Nothing yet, ma'am," the Sensors officer replied.

"Those skimmers better be there."

"They will be," Straker said. "Zaxby's a pain, but he's punctual and precise. He'd never pass up a chance to play hero."

"Well, it's out of my hands now," Gray said. "Time to dismantle this pirate. Pass to the cruisers: close to long range and begin coordinated volley fire of primary weaponry. Transports to remain in reserve, out of range."

A pause, and then the Comms officer spoke. "All ships have acknowledged."

Straker watched the cruisers shrink their triangle, drawing closer to each other as they advanced against the oncoming *Mangler*. A holoplate off to the side showed a constructed detail of the enemy ship. Unlike the cigar-shaped human vessels, the mini-monitor looked like a lumpy brick, with weapons and armor haphazardly built on.

"See?" Gray asked, pointing at the holoplate. "No spinal weaponry, so there's no way her beams can reach us at long range. Railguns, the same—utterly inaccurate at this distance. They have missiles, but not enough to

penetrate our defenses. I won't let them get close enough to board, so it's just a matter of time."

"How long to take her apart?" Straker asked.

"A few hours to batter her to a hulk from long range—assuming the goal is zero casualties, zero damage on our side."

"It is... but I don't like waiting to land our ground troops. The longer it takes, the more time the Korveni overseers have to do something horrible to the population. I'm going to skirt your battle and begin the assault if I can."

"Understood. If the *Mangler* turns to intervene, we'll close in and rake her. Good luck, sir."

"Thanks, Ellen."

Jilani spoke up. "I need to launch the *Cassiel* and join you."

"What? No, you can come along on the transports," Straker replied.

"*Cassiel* needs to guide you into the cylinder. I've got the codes to unlock it and you don't."

"Oh really? Why didn't you tell me this before?"

Jilani gave him a bored grimace. "Because you might say no. Now, you have to let me do it—or find your own way in."

An instant of fury swept through Straker. He could order a withdrawal, force Jilani's hand by threatening to leave her people in the lurch—but that was a petty impulse, and she was right. She wasn't one of his officers, and he might have said no.

"You should have trusted me rather than twisting my arm."

"Sorry, General. Trust doesn't come easy to me." Jilani paused. "Okay, look, I'll give you the codes—but I still think I should be first in. What's it gonna be?"

"You can launch and take point, but you spring any more surprises on us and I'll lose trust in *you*. It goes both ways."

"Yeah. Got it... *Bossman*." She grinned, eager to begin.

"Better... *Captain*. Get moving."

Jilani bounced away.

"What an annoying person," Gray said.

"She's not military. As long as she doesn't keep pulling stunts like that...I think she'll work out. I'm going back to *Caribou* now."

Gray grunted, evidently not convinced. "Good luck, sir."

"Thanks. See you on the other side."

By the time Straker brainlinked into his suit and tapped into the command net, the cruisers were taking the *Mangler* under fire from long range, causing her shields to flare repeatedly. The Korveni monitor accelerated toward the trio and launched a cloud of small, fast missiles.

The cruisers picked most of those off and shields caught what remained. All exploded with merely conventional strength—no nukes, no antimatter—but Gray was remaining cautious. She held the range open and pummeled the enemy with triple salvos. These had no visible effect, but would be straining the enemy shield generators and burning up their energy supply.

As the two forces dueled, Straker ordered the transports to swing wide in a ring around the enemy and approach the Dyson cylinder. Jilani's fast sloop *Cassiel* was already speeding in an arc which skirted the battle.

Far in the distance, the Korveni frigate was approaching flatspace. Straker focused his attention, and the VR-HUD in his brainlink obligingly zoomed in and sent his viewpoint into an illusion of nearness to it.

Suddenly, a powerful explosion rocked the Korveni ship, highlighting her spherical shield—then another.

The first blast took down the shield.

The next broke the frigate in half.

Skimmers appeared—from underspace or from stealthy hiding, it was hard to be sure—and fired a few desultory beams at the hulks to ensure all weapons were destroyed. They then grappled. Ruxin marines would be checking for surviving captives—and executing any Korveni they found.

Problem solved. No warning, no Korveni reinforcements.

Straker returned his attention to the approach toward Utopia. The *Mangler* was outmatched and now backing up. She had begun a slow retreat toward the Dyson cylinder, still not aware the transports were not really cruisers.

Jilani's ship sped ahead and approached the giant hab near one side of its axial hub. It was the logical entry point for any spinning cylinder. The transports followed in a tightening flock, and as Straker shifted his synthetic viewpoint he saw an entry port large enough for the sloop—but not for the cruiser-sized transports.

"Straker to Jilani." No answer. He cursed, remembering that Indy wasn't there to monitor all comms and route everything perfectly. "Straker to Comms."

"Comms here."

“Get me a comlink to Jilani.”

There was a momentary pause. “Comlink established.”

“Jilani here, bossman,” a feminine voice said.

“The entry port isn’t wide enough for our transports,” Straker said.

“We’ll have to use small craft. Once inside, is there a way to get down from the axis?”

“The sides are sloped, very slightly, and almost null-grav at the middle, so you could walk down, theoretically... but it’s a damn long walk of 20,000 klicks. I suggest you use landers.”

“Dammit, Jilani, this is info that would’ve been useful a long time ago!”

“Hey, I didn’t think about the diameter of your ships—and none of your people asked, either! And remember, there’s atmo inside near the ground. Almost nothing up in the middle, but it gets thick down low.”

“Atmo...?” That gave Straker an idea. “And you don’t know what’s facing us on the ground?”

“No. I was never able to get inside—I’m working from twenty-year-old memories. I’m going in now—I’ll recon for you.”

“No, wait—” he began, but the comlink had dropped.

“Lost contact, sir,” Comms said, coming onto the line. “We’re out of line-of-sight of her ship inside the Dyson habitat.”

“Keep trying,” Straker ordered. “Do you have a relay drone?”

“No sir, we’re not equipped.”

“Never mind, then.”

Captain Desautel broke in. “Liberator, we’re not equipped for carrying the whole ground force at once either—especially not mechsuits. Not into full gravity at sixty tons apiece.”

“I know. Put as many Hok as you can into landers. Coordinate with the other transports to do the same. The mechsuits will get down on their own.”

“Sir?”

“We’ll drop.”

“Sir... I’m just a simple transport captain, but I never heard of a suit drop from twenty thousand klicks up.”

“Me neither, Captain. First time for everything.”

“Okay, sir.”

“The mechsuits will go into the hub first to recon. You hold the landers outside the hab. I’ll take a look and give you further instructions soon.”

“The *Caribou*’s at rest to the hub entrance now, five hundred meters away. Should I open the cargo bay doors?”

“Confirm all suits are sealed, then open when ready.”

The doors opened a moment later, revealing a magnificent sight wired directly to Straker’s optic nerves. He seemed to stand looking into a long pipe with a bright light at its far end, set in the middle of a vast plain, stretching in all directions, filling half of space. The plain was actually the side of the tall, narrow cylinder, appearing like a disc falling away in all directions as Straker floated outside the axis of its wheel.

He fought a moment of vertigo as he opened the Guard channel. “Mechsuit squads, report in order when ready to deploy to the entry port,” he said. “First squad is ready.”

“Second squad ready,” Loco said.

The rest reported ready after a few pauses as the transports carefully jetted into position with thrusters.

“Launch in numerical order. Don’t start until the squad ahead of you reports they’re down. Conserve suit fuel—it could be a long day without resupply. First squad, make ready.”

The other Jackhammers joined Straker in the open cargo bay door. They were like four men readying themselves to skydive out the ramp of an old-fashioned aeroplane, except this time they’d be floating easy across the gap.

“Go.” Straker leaped, relaxed, his stability jets keeping him oriented and ready to land. The others followed. They touched down with magnetics in the entry tube, which turned out to be thirty meters across—roomy for mechsuits and landers, if too small for the transport ships.

There was some recognizable machinery here and there—what looked like clamps for ships and a rail transport system with unlit control panels.

Some was not so recognizable, and the symbology on the panels was unknown. It did have the feel of something that could eventually be deciphered like hieroglyphics and in colors not too far from human norms.

The builders may not have looked like humans, but their senses must have been similar—their size was perhaps only a little larger from the dimensions of the rail vehicle cockpits. The seats were big enough for a battlesuited man to ride, though the padding hung in scraps, suggesting great age.

“You gonna get out of the way, boss?” Loco asked.

“Yeah, sorry. I was gawking at alien stuff. First squad, follow me.” Straker led the way down the tunnel. There was no perceptible gravity, so he simply stepped off and let his SAI fly him in the middle with thrusters—accelerating to a comfortable fifty KPH or so.

The other mechsuit squads followed in turn for over five kilometers, the thickness of the cylinder wall. As Jilani had reported no opposition in her flight through the tube, he didn’t expect to run into any enemy, but he remained vigilant, weapons at the ready. He shut them down when he reached the other end and looked out upon the vast inner space.

The distance was great—more than 10,000 kilometers to the far wall, more than 20,000 kilometers to the floor, the “ground” of the habitat. The only thing visible other than the inner wall nearby—what appeared to be painted metal or perhaps plastic—was the oddly dim mini-star and its moon off to the side apparently in orbit.

There must be a filter or barrier, Straker thought, otherwise the tiny sun would have appeared as a blinding blaze. Instead, it seemed no more than a bright light. What’s more, it was completely blocked for about half its circumference, making it appear as if he stood above a lighthouse looking directly down upon it, its broad searchlight aiming at the inner rim to create the day.

The brainiacs had wondered how day and night were provided inside, and it appeared their most popular theory was correct. There was some kind of hemisphere, like a huge bowl, a focusing dish, that rotated around the light source in the center. This formed a large, diffuse beam that swept across the surface, alternately lighting and darkening the ground.

The moon Jilani remembered hung in the sky, a tiny body in orbit around the central star. It didn’t appear to be exactly like a normal planet’s moon, but its likely purpose was not primarily to light the night but to provide the tides that churned the rivers and seas of the large inner surface area. Straker wondered idly whether, if he leaped for the moon thousands of kilometers away, could he land on it? And what was it made of?

Someday soon, a Breaker ship would fly over and see... but right now, there were Korveni to kill.

All six squads of four mechsuits had joined him at the rim, standing with their magnetic boots on the edge, heads pointing inward, an odd sensation. “Straker to Jilani.” He couldn’t see her ship, but it was in here somewhere.

“Jilani here.”

“We need a bead on our target. Have you located them?”

“Yes, bossman. Sending you the info now.”

Straker’s HUD showed an unseen target near the wall below them. Lucky it was below, he thought—then realized that every direction was ‘below’ from the axis. It *was* lucky, though, that the Korveni and their plantation wasn’t near the opposite wall. The Breakers would have needed to exit, re-load the transports and fly around the giant hab to the other side.

“Captain Jilani, where are your original colony ships?”

“Taken by the Korveni long ago, I figure. My people left them docked here, and after a few years they assumed it was safe to mothball and leave them without a watch. They wanted no contact with the outside.” She snorted ruefully. “So they had no warning when the Korveni dropped on our settlements. Idiots.”

“The price of freedom is eternal vigilance,” Straker said. “But don’t be too hard on them.”

“I *hate* them,” she snarled over the comlink. “I was a child, and they failed to take basic precautions to protect their children!”

“So you’re coming back to save them because you hate them?”

Jilani didn’t answer for a moment. “I can hate them and love them too, General Straker. Now get your asses down there, *se tu per favore*, and kill those *figli delle puttane*... sir. I’ll be right with you. Jilani out.”

Straker heard chuckles on the Guard channel, and he said privately to Loco, “Feisty minx, isn’t she?”

Loco replied, also privately, “Yeah, who wants a sheep for a girlfriend? Ah, don’t answer that. We ready?”

“Ready.” Straker went public again. “Guard mechsuits, prep for drop. We have no idea what the opposition looks like, except it’s unlikely to have heavy weapons or vehicles. Even so, don’t be complacent. You’re vulnerable to ADA during the drop. Spread out from each other, but stay near your squad leaders. Pop your canards as soon as you jump, and use them to reduce your terminal velocity. Do *not* burn fuel for jets unless you absolutely need to. You may need it to land, and it’ll only highlight you if they do have any big guns pointed at the sky. Ready?”

As soon as all acknowledge ready, he stepped out above the plantation marked below.

And floated there, of course, as there was no effective gravity. If he weren't in a suit, he'd have performed a face-palm.

Fortunately, he still had line-of-sight down the tube to the outside.
“Straker to *Caribou*.”

“Desautel here.”

“We're stepping off. Start sending your landers in. Watch out for us—our drop will start very slow.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

“Straker out.” He used his thrusters to roll over, faced the ground and then gently triggered his jets. “I assume the first thousand clicks or so will be a slow acceleration,” he said to the mechsuiters.

Loco broke in. “Hey, boss... my HUD drop projection is drifting off target already. It says I'm heading toward the star instead of the ground!”

“Shit... mine is too. What the hell is going on?”

Zaxby's voice broke in. “Physics, Derek Straker, that's what.”

“Zaxby, where are you?”

“Hovering one kilometer from you, inside the cylinder. Underspace is quite convenient for passing through walls.”

Straker used his HUD to look in all directions until he spotted Zaxby's new skimmer. “Good thing they didn't have some kind of anti-underspace shielding.”

“I moved slowly, in case I struck a barrier. As there is only a trace of atmosphere here in the hub area, I decided to risk it. I'm glad I did, as you failed to take elementary physics into account. I'm now available to freely advise you.”

Straker realized what Zaxby meant. “Coriolis force, right?” As he fell toward the ground, the ground was moving under him. He'd have to lead his target.

“That's not your only problem. Unless you accelerate yourself toward the ground, the star will pull you in with its gravity. Even if you do, it will influence your trajectory. There are multiple forces at work here.”

Straker tried to work it out in his head. “What's the rotation period of the cylinder?”

“About twenty-five hours.”

“And our drop duration is about...” Straker told his SAI to calculate it.
“Fourteen hours? Shit!”

He could hear Zaxby's amusement through the comlink. "You're 20,200 kilometers above the floor. Fortunately, the atmosphere is very thin until the last fifty kilometers. *Un*-fortunately, however, you will hit that last layer like a ripe melon strikes concrete, unless you use up a great deal of fuel controlling your descent—even if you manage to overcome all the forces affecting your accuracy."

"Shit, shit, shit," Straker said, almost panicking before he realized he'd barely moved two hundred meters from the axis. "Return to the rim." He jetted easily back and planted his magnetic soles in the tube again, as did the rest of the mechsuits.

"A wise decision," Zaxby said.

Now that he was standing again, Straker could see Zaxby's skimmer floating there like an elegant letter H, with her long twin engines and connecting hull between. "Okay, brainiac, what do you suggest?"

"I suggest you step out of the way," Zaxby said.

"What? Oh." Straker and the mechsuits stepped over the rim and onto the wall, changing orientation ninety degrees. Suddenly, instead of perching atop a wall, he seemed to be standing on a vast plain, looking into the circular pit of the access tube—through which a lander was rapidly progressing.

"We have twelve landers," Zaxby continued. "I suggest two mechsuits ride each lander to a point fifty kilometers above the target, at which point they can drop normally."

"Can the landers handle the tonnage?"

"As long as they don't have to actually land with that weight on them, they will do fine—just like a small ship in space can push a million-ton asteroid. As long as the atmosphere is thin and the landers remain floating inside this construct. The fact that it is rotating around them is irrelevant to the physics of the situation. In fact, the biggest danger to a non-spinning, unpowered object within this construct is its tendency to fall into the starlet."

"Gods and monsters, this is too complicated!"

"Ah, those words are music to a Ruxin brainiac's ears," Zaxby said smugly. "They confirm our inherent superiority."

Straker ground his teeth, unable to win a contest of rhetoric with Zaxby and forced himself to remain above it all—figuratively as well as literally.

“Okay, we’ll do as you say. Zaxby, take charge of this lander flotilla and guide us down to drop altitude. What’s our ETA?”

“About four hours. The landers will match rotation with the ground, but I will provide all the parameters to the pilots and the lander SAIs as it is a complex flight plan—a form of orbital mechanics in reverse.”

“Great, great. Get it done, Zaxby.”

“Of course, I shall save the day yet again. Step aboard this first lander, please, General Straker, and one other mechsuirer as well.”

Straker stepped carefully onto the landing skid, magnetizing his soles and gauntlets. One of his squad took the other side. “Once you’re on a lander and the lander pilot’s happy with the mass distribution, freeze your mechsuits and relax,” he instructed his mechsuirers. “Take a nap or play a vidgame, because we’re stuck in position until drop time.”

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Chapter 27

Straker, in his mechsuit, inside Utopia

“All landers, report when ready for drop,” Straker said as the landers approached fifty kilometers in altitude. Below him he could see a landscape spreading from the nearby world-wall out into the distance toward the far side.

At this height details were scarce, but his SAI and HUD allowed him to zoom in and see the plantation below—a semicircle backed up against the rising world-wall. “Wall” was a deceptive term at ground level, for it curved and blended into the flat surface like a mountainside falling away to a plain. In fact, the mechsuits could probably land on the mountains many kilometers above the settlement and run down the steep slope, but that would waste time.

The lander engines had been firing intermittently for some time, matching rotation with the Dyson cylinder. Now, they led the movement of the surface by the precise distance needed to drop the mechsuits.

But even “drop” was incorrect, Straker knew. He’d spent the last four hours getting his mind around the idea that the surface generated no significant actual gravity—not that those inside could feel. Instead, it was centrifugal force that kept things on the ground, just like in a spinning hab—so the suits wouldn’t actually fall when released. They had to be aimed and pushed toward the surface laterally, at an angle intersecting the landing zone.

Once on the ground the centrifugal force would act in most ways like gravity, indistinguishable to the average being. Until then it was a tricky, multi-body problem in motion.

“All landers ready. You’re lined up, sir,” the lander chief comlinked. “You need to step off in twenty seconds.”

“Roger, Chief. Thanks for the ride. Straker out. Break-break: Straker to all mechsuits. Release magnetics and step off gently in *ten, nine...*”

When the countdown reached zero, Straker demagnetized his suit and leaned outward. The thinnest of atmosphere wafted him away from the lander, and suddenly he found himself sailing at an angle toward the ground. He oriented his body and his suit like a skydiver and waited until all the landers had thrustered upward, letting the suits lead.

“Canards out,” he said, and popped his drop winglets for extra control and drag. “Match my motion and stay in formation. Wherever we land, we land together.”

His HUD showed all the mechsuits with canards out, under control. With SAI assistance, he aimed his suit down the virtual pipeline his HUD showed. When he started to drift off target, a burst of jets brought him back to his proper trajectory.

Forty kilometers, then thirty-five... he was traveling at high speed, approaching the ground obliquely. Really, he and the other suits were traveling in straight lines, but the ground itself, the inside of a wheel, was curving up to meet them. To compensate, the aiming pipeline also curved, flatter and flatter.

At thirty kilometers, the atmosphere thickened enough to feel its bite on his suit and canards. Terminal velocity fell with the drag, slowly, slowly. At twenty kilometers—20,000 meters—he started to feel as if he were truly dropping as the ground hurried toward him. His HUD pipeline rose and he struggled to stay in it, buffeted by cloudy air. Finally, he found himself in true atmosphere with winds and weather, the sky around him turning bluish with refraction effects.

His HUD told him the landers were following the drop down without difficulty now the mechsuits—each actually heavier than a lander—weren’t attached. The mechsuit battle-net hadn’t spotted any ADA below—no sensors questing for skyborne targets to shoot down.

Why should they? Utopia, or whatever the Korveni named it, was well hidden, and defended from the outside. Why waste effort on ground-based ADA?

That’s what Straker hoped, anyway. That’s what his brainiacs *assessed*.

But that didn’t mean there wouldn’t be resistance. The Korveni were no pushovers. That was why he’d brought mechsuits, and not merely marines. Expend ammo and fuel, not lives.

Belatedly, he wondered how he’d get the mechsuits off Utopia. Probably with skimmers, shuttling them out through underspace. Diving into that strange dimension from *within* atmo was no problem, unlike emerging *into* atmo.

10,000 meters. 5,000, the altitude where people could skydive for fun without oxygen or special protection on most planets. This kind of drop was exciting, but not what he would call “fun.”

Now he fired his jets, again and again, matching vectors with the ground and killing his approach speed like a winged aerospace plane coming in for a landing. One minute to touchdown. Drops burned fuel, and mechsuiters liked to immediately resupply from co-dropped modules... but there were none this time.

No resistance, no flak came up at him. His pilots kept excellent formation above the settlement below, which had three semicircles, three arcs like half of a three-tiered wedding cake. Each arc's ends were anchored against the rising wall.

There wasn't enough room to land safely within the walls—too many houses, barns and structures. His telescopic optics showed him humanoids working in fields and gardens, wagons pulled by animals, some mechanized farm equipment and a few groundcars... Trying to land there might crush or burn civilians.

Therefore, Straker's chosen landing point was necessarily outside the third wall, in what looked to be crop fields extending out into the wilderness and eventually merging into savannah. A river paralleled the world-wall some five kilometers out with irrigation canals connecting it to the fields. Near the river he spotted large herds of animals watering and throwing up clouds of dust.

"Boss, I see gun emplacements on the walls," Loco comlinked. "Light artillery or autocannon. Korveni manning them."

"Got 'em," Straker replied, zooming in. "All suits, go active now. You are weapons free. Take out those gun emplacements."

He used his last thirty seconds of flight to pump two force-cannon shots into two separate gun emplacements. They blew with satisfying secondary explosions.

And then he was down, stalling on jets and canards before retracting the winglets as he landed on his feet. Around him, the crop caught fire—not something he'd thought of until now.

"Deploy into line, facing the settlement," he told his pilots. "Move in, kill any Korveni you see. Watch out for friendlies."

He strode toward the first wall, which had gaps ripped in it where the gun emplacements had been. Scanning ahead he saw nothing heavier than a few Korveni combat cars mounting heavy slugthrowers and light lasers—racing to meet them. A few well-aimed gatling shots ripped the vehicles to shreds and slaughtered the Korveni troops.

A human crawled out of one of the burning armored cars and collapsed—the driver, it seemed. “Shit. We might have friendlies driving their vehicles.”

“Or maybe they’re pirates too—collaborators,” Loco replied. “These people have been here twenty years, boss. Damn, look out!”

This last exclamation was prompted by Jilani’s ship swooping low and landing in a blast of jets just inside the wall, laser turret spitting beams at a squad of Korveni taking cover behind a wooden barn that wouldn’t have been out of place a thousand years ago on Old Earth. The barn caught fire immediately.

Return fire peppered Jilani’s ship, and then a rocket shot by—narrowly missing as she landed.

“What the hell does she think she’s doing?” Loco snarled. “She’s gonna get herself killed!”

“Go cover her, Loco. Resistance is light—nothing we can’t handle without you.”

“Roger that, boss.” Loco raced forward to riddle the Korveni squad with gatling fire. Once sure the threat was eliminated, he stood next to Jilani’s ship looking for more targets. A ramp dropped, and the woman stepped out onto the soil of Utopia clad in unpowered combat armor. Her blaster was at the ready.

“Everybody hold up inside the outermost wall,” Straker ordered. The settlement rose up the hill in front of him. This allowed him to see most of it with his suit sensors. “We have visibility on the area, and it looks like they have nothing that can touch mechsuits.”

Behind the line of mechsuits, the landers set down in the burning fields and disgorged battlesuited Hok.

“Straker to Major 24,” he comlinked. “Deploy and secure the settlement by squads. Eliminate all Korveni and all other resistance. Spare any noncombatants you find, and take prisoner any surrendering non-Korven. The mechsuits will back you up and provide overwatch. Lander chief, see if you can put out these field fires, or at least keep them from spreading inward.”

An hour later, Major 24 reported the settlement secured. The field fires were out. The mechsuits stood like sentinels around the village with its dusty streets and low buildings. The Hok patrolled and killed stray Korveni.

Most of the pirates had come out to aggressively attack the invaders, which allowed the Breakers to shoot them down that much faster.

Now, the people of the settlement appeared in windows, on porches and sidewalks, staring with obvious curiosity as it became clear the military machinery wasn't hurting them. Many were thin and downtrodden with haunted eyes and fear etched on their faces. Others, mostly men, seemed hard-faced and angry.

A mix of people gathered in the village square around a large square and three-storied stone keep. The smoke and flame of battle still sputtered from it. Standing at the edge of the plaza, Straker examined it from within his mechsuit, and then asked Major 24 about the structure.

"Apparently it's a guardhouse and command location, sir! Quarters for fifty Korveni, small arms and weapon emplacements, sir! It also mounts primitive public announcement equipment—loudspeakers, sir!"

"Thanks. Straker out."

"Roger that, sir! Major 24 out, sir!"

This must be where the overseers had dictated their orders to the populace. Despite the thinness of some people, the settlement seemed reasonably prosperous. Then he noticed a horizontal line of wooden crosses mounted on all four sides of the square keep. Some of them were occupied with decomposing bodies, nailed to the thick wood with spikes through their wrists, pelvises and feet.

Straker figured Jilani's people should be jumping for joy at being liberated, waving banners and throwing flowers, but they weren't—not even when she walked among them toward the keep. Once she removed her helmet they crowded around her, the only human figure with a visible face. As Straker watched, they chattered and touched her with their fingertips as if to confirm she was real, but they seemed in a daze.

"Loco, let's you and me dismount and join Captain Jilani," Straker said. "The rest of you pilots, keep on your toes. Remember how the Korveni base was booby-trapped. There still might be surprises."

"Now you're talking, boss." Loco cracked his suit and leaped down to the flagstones of the plaza in his battlesuit, startling some locals. He retracted his helmet and said loudly, smiling and waving, "*Buongiorno! Buongiorno! Come va? Come va?*"

Straker did the same, without the banal Italian greetings, and then stepped out of his battlesuit before telling his mechsuit SAI to retrieve it

remotely for security. The mechsuit opened and obediently walked the battlesuit into its cockpit before closing.

It was a small risk to walk among the people without the powered armor, but his skinsuit was proof against most hand weapons, and there were Hok all over the area. He wanted to show the people he was human—not a conqueror but a liberator.

“Hello—hello, anyone speak Earthan?” he said as he strolled. Most of the people gawked fearfully and stayed back, except for a few curious boys who laughed and called out unknown words. Few girls were visible, and those he could see had their hands firmly held by suspicious elders or were hustled back into the buildings out of sight.

When he reached the base of the keep, he found Loco and Jilani talking to a thin, beaten-down older man who stood clutching a crude straw hat and bobbing his head.

“*Si, signora*, we are very grateful for freeing us from the Korveni, but there is—”

“Do you know a man called Alfio Jilani? Or his wife Francesca?” Jilani interrupted.

“*Si, si*, I know of them. There are many Jilanis on the east side.”

“Take me to them!”

“*D’accordo, d’accordo. Eh, Milagro!*” The man gestured at a boy of ten or eleven, and spoke in rapid Italian. “Milagro will show you.”

“I’ll come with you,” Loco said.

“Keep your comlink in,” Straker called as the two strode away toward the east.

Loco waved to acknowledge.

Straker turned to the man. “What’s your name?”

“I am Teodoro Gagliano, the mayor of Nuovo Paradiso.” He sniffed ruefully. “*Nuovo Inferno* is what we called it until today—the New Hades. The Korveni were demons. And you are, *signore?*”

“I’m Derek Straker. These are some of my military unit, Straker’s Breakers. Ms. Jilani convinced us to destroy the Korveni and rescue your people.”

“The Holy Mother be praised for our salvation, Signor Straker, and the people of New Paradise thank you, but we—”

He was interrupted by a fat man who broke through the circle of onlookers accompanied by two muscular, scowling men with cudgels in

their hands. “What are you telling these people, Teo? More of your lies?”

Interesting that the man spoke in Earthan rather than Italian, Straker thought. For my benefit, then. Was it Machiavelli who said, “Where there are three people, there are politics”? This guy’s trying to convince me of something—or he’s afraid of offending me.

“I told no lies, Degrosso. Only that the Korveni are demons and to thank Signor Straker here.”

“And did you call yourself the mayor of our fine city?”

“I *am* the mayor, elected by the people.”

“There was no election, so there is no mayor! I am the *capo* here, and I’m in charge!”

Gagliano turned to Straker. “Signore, this man is a puppet of the Korveni, a collaborator.”

“I am no such thing!” Degrosso barked. “I only had the people’s welfare in mind. My men and I protected the people against the worst the Korveni did—when I could, you understand, Signor Straker.” He donned a frown like an inept actor. “It was a hard life, but we are grateful to you for freeing us.”

“Hard enough for you to grow fat, Degrosso?”

Straker’s first instinct was to believe Gagliano, not Degrosso, but there might be more to the situation than met the eye. Drastic decisions could wait a day or two—assuming all was well with Gray and her fight with the *Mangler*.

Straker held up a hand and put a finger to his comlink. “One moment, gentlemen. Straker to Zaxby.”

“Zaxby here.”

“Where are you?”

“Flying above you, providing overwatch.”

“Good,” Straker said. “Do you know how Gray’s doing?”

“She and our flotilla have rendered the *Mangler* combat-ineffective and are standing by for further orders.”

“Tell her to act as she sees fit. Keep her apprised of our situation here and vice-versa.”

As he was speaking, Gagliano had stepped up to him and was now shaking his sleeve. “*Signore, signore.*”

Degrosso grabbed the smaller man, but then stopped angrily at Straker’s raised palm. “Let him go,” Straker said. “What is it, Signor Gagliano?”

“The shovelheads. We must secure against the shovelheads, very soon,” Gagliano said earnestly.

Straker left the comlink open, furrowing his brow. “What’s that? What’s a shovelhead?”

“Dangerous animals, Signor Straker,” Degrasso said. “I was coming to warn you. I’m surprised this fool remembered!” He laughed loudly, and his two men did as well, on cue.

“We must put aside our differences for now,” Gagliano said, still holding onto Straker’s sleeve. “The shovelheads are gathering at the river, and soon they will stampede. We are grateful for your coming, of course, but it is unfortunate that you didn’t come tomorrow or the next day, for the Korveni and their weapons were all that stood between us and destruction.”

Straker’s military mind flashed back to the gun emplacements on the wall. The weapons were high-velocity gatling-style slugthrowers of fifteen-millimeter caliber. There’d also been mortars. The combination of the two weapons would be worthless against modern forces like the Breakers. He’d assumed they were to defend against primitives... but then he remembered Jilani denied there were any other sentient peoples here.

“You said shovelheads would stampede... like...” Straker dredged up a memory of historical showvids about the Wild West. “Like a herd of buffalo?”

Degrasso started to answer over Gagliano.

“Let the man speak,” Straker warned and gave the fat fellow such a hard look that he shut up—fuming.

“Far worse than that,” Gagliano said. “They are like a plague of locusts. Every year they gather by the millions and migrate. They are not gentle beasts like cattle. In this season they are maddened—ripping up and eating anything in their path, attacking and also devouring every creature, plant or animal. Only killing untold numbers will turn them—and sometimes not even then. In the third year of our coming they killed five thousand people, and we had to flee from our original settlement by the river to here at the world-wall—climbing high and sealing ourselves in caves.”

Gagliano gestured toward the looming vertical. “The next third-year they destroyed most of our crops, and many of us starved. We buried many families... but we learned. Eventually we cut terraces in the hills to plant and built walls to save some things. But every third-year—this year—they

would come in ever-greater waves to tear down the walls and many buildings. Each time we rebuilt... until the Korveni came.”

“And since the Korveni came, we are safe and prosperous!” Degrosso said. “They defend us against the shovelheads, and there is food enough for the children and for those who live in peace.”

“For those who collaborate and submit, you mean.” Gagliano lifted his hand to point at the decomposing bodies on the crosses above. “To those who would be free, that is what they do... or worse.”

“What could be worse than crucifixion?” Straker asked.

“Every year they steal our prettiest girls, our finest boys from their families. We never see them again. Some of our people damn their own souls and drown their newborns rather than see them taken... or they disfigure their children to make them ugly and impossible to sell. The Korveni punish our people for any offense and nail them to the crosses.” The old man made the sign of the cross on his chest—a religious thing, Straker knew.

“The Korveni are gone now. You’ve nothing to fear from them anymore... or from us,” Straker said.

Degrosso ignored Straker and roared at Gagliano, “The Korveni kept us safe from the shovelheads and the other dangers!”

“What other dangers? Freedom? Speaking without fear? Governing ourselves? Growing more food and less Erbaccia?”

Straker stepped between them before Degrosso could argue back. “We destroyed the weapons that defended the settlement, but we’ll protect you now, until you can protect yourselves.”

“Thank you, Your Excellency,” Degrosso said with slimy obsequiousness. “We must have immediate protection from the shovelheads.” He looked past Straker at Gagliano. “You with your philosophical blather! Soon you’d be whining so much about our troubles you’d forget to ask our new benefactors.”

Turning back to Straker he smiled again. “He means well, but he is a tired old fool, not a man of strength and decision like you and me!”

Straker’s grunt was noncommittal. “When will these shovelheads arrive?”

Zaxby spoke on the comlink. “I believe I can answer that question: approximately thirty minutes.”

“Thirty minutes?” Spurred by the answer, Straker turned to jog back toward his parked Jackhammer, leaving the civilians behind. “Shit. Put me on the widest channel.”

“Done.”

“This is Straker. Loco, get your ass back to your suit, full speed. Hok and mechsuiters to the outer wall, *now*. Landers will reposition within the perimeter and remain engines-hot for immediate liftoff and fire support. Zaxby, if you can rustle up some more skimmers or armed shuttles it would help.”

“I believe I can solve the problem without a battle, Derek Straker.”

“How’s that?”

“I can lay a small atomic bomb on the advancing herd. That will kill all of them within a one-kilometer radius and probably divert the rest. If not, I can always use a larger device.”

Straker forced himself to seriously consider the outlandish suggestion—nuking a bunch of herd animals? Seemed like overkill, but Zaxby was no fool. If he was suggesting it... “What effect will that have on the civilians here?”

“I predict fewer than one thousand deaths if everyone takes immediate shelter. They’ll have to rebuild many structures, and will need medical support to treat the radiation sickness, but—”

“Forget it. We’re not killing a thousand people and poisoning the land just to take the easy way out.”

“*Fewer* than one thousand deaths.”

“No,” Straker insisted.

“I could use an antimatter device, though our stocks are low. There is little persistent radiation with such an explosion, though the direct death toll and blast damage would be similar.”

Straker considered. “No. We’ll handle this the old-fashioned way.”

“Is there an old-fashioned way to battle millions of crazed omnivorous herd animals bent on eating you?”

“Not with nukes, I’ll tell you that.”

Zaxby indulged in sarcasm. “Perhaps with swords and spears? Bows and arrows? The farmers could take up their pitchforks.”

“Not *that* old-fashioned. Force-cannon and blasters will do fine.”

“By my calculations you’ll run short of ammo long before you kill enough shovelheads. Pity that you destroyed all the mortars and autocannon

so prematurely.”

“Zaxby, shitcan the critique and start helping. Get Gray to send whatever she can inside. Armed shuttles, pinnaces, anything that flies and shoots.”

“I’ve done so already,” he said. “Also, my skimmers will transit via underspace and emerge high above us, where the atmosphere is very thin. They’ll use their weaponry as soon as they are able, but I fear all reinforcements will be too late.”

“How late?” Straker demanded.

“At least an hour.”

“We’ll hold until then.”

“That would be wise, considering the alternative... but it is unlikely.”

“We’ll hold!”

By this time Straker was back in his mechsuit and in position at the center of the curving wall, facing outward. Again he cursed himself for blowing holes in the barrier and destroying all the Korveni weaponry. It was a natural mistake, but a mistake nonetheless.

“Mechsuiters, stand in the holes. You *are* the gun emplacements now. When the shovelheads come, make your shots count. Conserve ammo! Zaxby says we’ll probably run low before we drive them off.”

The Jackhammers moved up to take position behind the destroyed weapons pits. Hok loped up and stood behind the chest-high wall between the mechsuiters, blasters aiming over it.

“Major 24, have your men salvage and see if they can get any of the Korveni crew-served weapons operational.”

“Roger wilco, sir!” Five minutes later, the Hok came up with one operational 100mm mortar and a surprising number of undamaged shells for it.

Behind the line, twelve landers rested, ready to pop up into the air and use their point-defense lasers. Above the battlefield, Zaxby’s skimmer cruised.

“Boss, look!” Loco cued Straker’s HUD downward and back.

From behind, Straker observed lines of citizens, mostly able-bodied men, trudging out to the wall in their thousands. They carried a mix of weapons and tools, everything from shovels and pitchforks, spears and crossbows up to captured Korveni blasters. Mayor Gagliano led the nearest line and waved at Straker’s mechsuit.

“Mayor Gagliano,” Straker said over his external loudspeaker. “Your people should withdraw to the caves. If we can’t hold, you’ll be overrun.”

“The women and children—and the cowards like Degrosso—are going to the caves. We here are willing to die for our people if we must, *Generale*. We cannot stand idly by.” The old man yelled orders in rapid-fire Italian, and his troops spread out.

“Shit,” Straker said conversationally to Loco after turning off the loudspeaker. “If we can’t hold...”

“We’re gonna feel terrible about leaving these poor bastards to be trampled when we withdraw to the next wall.”

“Right.” Straker gauged the distance to the wall behind, a wall without fixed weapon emplacements—but also without holes or damage. It stood a full kilometer back, and was much smaller, perhaps half the perimeter of the larger one. He addressed Gagliano again. “Mayor Gagliano, will you take my orders?”

“Anything, *mio Generale*.”

“Give your modern firearms to your fittest people or your fastest runners and leave them here. They will fight with us and withdraw with us when the time comes. Take the rest back to the second wall. It’s a better wall—a shorter wall and easier to defend. You’ll be needed there. Otherwise, when we pull back, all your people will die—because we will pull back—maybe more than once.”

Gagliano seemed ready to protest, but then he nodded. “*Si, mio Generale*. We will do as you say.” After some confusion, most of the citizens trudged back toward the second wall.

“Boss...”

Straker turned his attention back to the front and took in a sight that made him thankful he was in a mechsuit. The clouds of dust that had been approaching now reached the line of thin bushes and trees that marked the rough delineation with the farm fields, about five kilometers off. If only there’d been time to flood them... but maybe...

“Hok, fire a few blaster shots and get the crops burning again,” he ordered. Soon, patches of fire sprung up.

Beyond, he zoomed his optics in on the approaching herd of shovelheads. Isolated and stabilized by his HUD display, he was able to examine one. His first impression was of a striped dinosaur or a rhinoceros. A real animal with four legs, thick skin and beady eyes, marked like a zebra

with vertical stripes of light and dark gray. Just under three meters at the shoulder, it looked to mass five to ten tons, with a neckless body shaped like a warthog's.

The source of its name was obvious, for the thing's head was flattened and a ridge of solid bone or horn material protruded from above its four nostrils, running backward in a wedge to a point over and behind its low-set eyes. Straker could easily see the animal digging up the soil like a pig used its snout, but on a much larger scale... or simply using the thick slab of horn to batter its foes like a bighorn ram.

Below the plate of horn it had tusks like a warthog and a mouthful of sharp pointed teeth—a land-going shark, an eating machine. Nasty customer. Straker wondered if, like sharks, they would eat their own dead—or attack their own wounded.

But even such an animal would be nothing to worry about for powered armor—except for its numbers. Straker accessed Zaxby's feed and tried to get an estimate of the herd size. He zoomed out to encompass five kilometers and saw no end.

Ten.

Twenty.

Forty.

When his field of view encompassed a diameter of fifty kilometers he began seeing the edge of the herd. Most of it was not dense or thick, not shoulder-to-shoulder the way those approaching were, and they tended to cluster at the river—where it became apparent that they were literally drinking it dry, as after a certain point downstream there was nothing but mud.

In fact, it appeared the water, flowing from the west—or the left as Straker faced them—was one of the migration factors. The herd was moving generally westward or upriver—probably an instinct to reach more water and find more food after stripping the landscape bare.

As the locals said, the shovelheads tended to attack anything they noticed in a mass. The approaching ones were ripping up the sparse trees and bushes and eating them even as they moved. Above them carrion creatures flew—vultures or their ecological analogues. The birds hoped to reap a feast.

His HUD calculated there were more than fifty million shovelheads in this herd alone.

Straker wondered if there was any chance at all of pulling back and out of the way—but to do so would be to lose every structure in the settlement—every store, every barn, every mill, every machine, every cow and sheep and chicken that wasn't brought into the caves.

When they reached the edge of the burning fields, the shovelheads barely paused. A few in the front turned aside, but they were either shoved back into line or trampled under by the rest.

The locals began firing their weapons until Straker called for them to cease. "Wait for my order and we'll hit them all at once!" he told them, and reinforced his instructions on his comlink. Maybe if he could stun the herd hard enough, they'd change direction. They must have some rudimentary sense of self-preservation, if only to keep them from running off cliffs.

Or maybe not. Maybe it made better ecological sense for them to do nothing but mindlessly eat and breed and die.

"Get that mortar working," Straker said, and the Hok team immediately began dropping bombs down the tube with metronomic timing and efficiency. Being in battlesuits, they had no need to duck out of the way of the muzzle blast, so they sent bombs into the air at a rate of two a second.

The explosions fell at first in front of the advancing line, and then inside it. Burst after burst cut down several beasts at a time, but otherwise, the herd ignored it.

At a range of one thousand meters Straker considered ordering the Jackhammers to fire, but held off. They simply didn't have the ammo or fuel to kill millions of shovelheads. The initial volley had to be a good one, and must be combined with the Hok blasters in hopes of getting the herd to turn.

At six hundred meters he said, "Get ready. Landers lift off. Zaxby, fire when we do. Make every shot count. Turn these porkers into hamburger."

The shovelheads came on.

Ten seconds.

Five.

"Fire!"

Twenty-four mechsuits with force-cannon and electric gatlings laid a storm of fire on the shovelheads. Beneath the converging destruction, a company of Hok marines poured plasma blaster bolts into the boiling clouds of exploding meat. They turned blood to steam and bone to shards.

The locals joined in, firing their slugthrowers and blasters and hunting rifles. Straker wondered how long it would be before they ran themselves out of ammo.

From higher still, twelve landers played their lasers across the front of the herd. The greenish beams were small by the standards of space combat, but each one was the size of a crew-served infantry weapon and limited only by the fuel available to generate their energy. Above it all, Zaxby's skimmer and Jilani's sloop strafed laterally, up and down the battlefield. First, from the defenders' left to right and then swooping back right to left as the edge of the herd came closer and closer—seething with hellish destruction.

Four hundred meters. Three hundred.

Two hundred.

"Citizens, fall back! Fall back to the next wall!" Straker roared on his loudspeaker.

A few nearby turned to run, but most didn't. They kept firing at the oncoming nightmares—probably they couldn't hear him, not without comlinks.

Straker overrode the network and projected his voice through the loudspeakers of all of the mechsuits. "Citizens, Utopians, Italians, fall back! Retreat!"

He shifted fire from his own weapons farther into the herd, as other shooters were already turning the forward edge of the shovelheads into an inferno, but the animals weren't stopping.

One hundred meters.

Finally, most of the locals ran, some of them abandoning heavy blasters or ammo packs. The shovelheads kept on coming, those in the rear simply running over the top of those who had died in front. Straker's overhead view showed him less than one percent of the mass in front of them had been destroyed—and that mass was only a tiny fraction of the overall herd.

He wondered whether he should've allowed Zaxby to nuke them after all. If the locals had all run for the caves first thing... but Zaxby's assessment of a thousand dead must've taken into account the impossibility of getting all civilians under cover.

Now, it was looking like one thousand dead might have been a bargain.

Chapter 28

Straker in Utopia

“Try to hold them at the wall!” Straker ordered as he continued to kill shovelheads and resisted the usual urge to yell. Veterans didn’t yell over comlinks. Cool and deadly, that was the mechsuirer way. Observe, aim, fire, move, all simultaneous, without losing focus or panicking.

Right. Straker told himself these things were less dangerous than heavy tanks, but the herd’s advance felt so...

Implacable.

“Major 24 use jump jets to disengage when needed to preserve your troops. Fall back to the second wall at your discretion.” Without that order, some of the Hok might die in place. They were too literal-minded, most of them. “Mortar team, leave the mortar and withdraw now.” They would easily carry the weapon, but not the crates of mortar bombs. Besides, the overall effect of the weapon had been minimal, despite at least a thousand shovelheads killed by bombs alone.

For long seconds their massed fire held the shovelheads at the wall. The barrier slowed them, and the mechsuits ambushed them as they leaked through the holes where the weapon pits used to be. The landers hovered by brute force on their jets, ripping holes in the herd that instantly refilled with an endless wave of animals.

Straker’s HUD told him they’d killed at least 100,000 shovelheads—but four or five million had taken it into their piggy brains to attack the irritating two-legged creatures on the hillside that rose up against the wall of the world. At this rate it would take hours to slaughter them all—but the defenders would be out of ammo and fuel long before.

“Landers... bounce back, and set up to cover the next wall. Land and take positions on higher ground if you can—save fuel for lasers, not flying. Major 24, leapfrog back and continue firing. Execute now.”

The landers and Hok retreated, and suddenly the shovelheads poured through the holes and past the wall. Parts of the barrier crumbled as the animals scattered the stones with their shoveling heads. In moments, they’d leveled the obstruction as if it weren’t even there, with a cooperation almost like ants—or perhaps it was a shared rage at anything that opposed them.

The Hok retreated—leapfrogging by squads and firing on the run with perfect discipline, while the shovelheads swirled around the mechsuits' legs.

What could they do to a sixty-ton duralloy monster? Straker strode among them, stomping and shooting them. He kicked them like rats and they flew broken through the air—until he slipped in the accumulated bloody meat and almost fell. His stabilizer jets caught him, but he wondered what would happen if he hit the ground and stayed down. At the very least, they would eventually break his LADA lenses and damage some of the fixtures—the jets, the stubby protruding gatling barrels, the magnetic emitter tubes on the tips of his force-cannon.

Would the relentless battering of millions of shovelheads be enough to eventually destroy a suit? He didn't want to find out.

"Mechsuits, withdraw," he ordered. "Use your jets if you have to. Whatever you do, don't fall."

His words were prophetic as he saw one suit slip, trip, flail and go down like a man trying to keep his feet atop a sheet of marbles. Straker fired his force-cannon left and right of the fallen mechsuit and burned far too much ammo from his gatlings keeping the man clear of the shovelheads.

The mechsuit somersaulted backward and bounced to his feet with superb athleticism. He saw it was Lieutenant Hetson—a pilot who'd been one of the four to survive the battle on the Crystal megaship. He'd transferred into the Guard to replace one of the pilots killed on Premdor.

"Quit fucking around, Hetson, and withdraw to the wall," Straker barked. "Don't make me regret saving your sorry ass—again!"

"Roger that, sir," came the cheerful reply, and the Jackhammer turned to leap and lope ahead of the herd.

Straker followed his own advice, triggering a short jet burst to shake loose of the snapping, ramming animals and get momentum toward the second line of defense. He checked his fuel state: forty percent. The drop had used a lot of isotopes—too much, in hindsight. By chance and happenstance, his hurry to liberate the people of Utopia had hurt, not helped, his cause. How much easier it would have been to come tomorrow, when the Korveni and the locals would have carried out their organized defense against this devastating surge of fauna.

Those emplaced autocannon, while not high-tech, would have been perfect against the herd. As long as they had ammo, they could have fired

continuously, endlessly, thousands of rounds per minute. Set to grazing fire at shoulder level to the animals, each bullet would penetrate two, three, even four at a time. A little math in his head showed the Korveni's specialized setup would've killed the critters five to ten times faster than the Guard could. He'd seen the ammo cases stacked high, along with the mortars, enough to heat their barrels to the melting point before it was gone... but that was all water under the bridge now.

Yet why spend so much effort defending their slaves? That Erbaccia must be valuable stuff.

But it was all trampled now. Something about the situation seemed out of place, to make no sense, but Straker was far too busy to think about it right now.

He stepped carefully over the second wall, making sure he didn't crush anyone on the other side, and then turned back. The shovelheads had already covered half the thousand-meter distance. There were a few locals still running, winded, trying to make it back—but they were out of time.

The herd swallowed them as it thundered closer.

There was nothing to be done.

"Stand by to fire on my order," Straker comlinked. Then, he overrode the loudspeakers again to tell the gaggle of locals waiting with their pitiful remaining weapons, "You Italians fall back and get in your caves. You're brave, but you'll only die when they reach this wall."

The herd was a little more ragged this time, broken up by casualties and delays at the first wall. Some groups charged onward while other bunches stopped to attack and eat fallen fellows—confirmation of their shark-like behavior. From his elevated position he could see swirls and eddies in the herd that indicated other feeding frenzies behind the charging line.

They had no fear, but they did seem to be ravenous, so perhaps a change in tactics was in order.

"Landers, target the herd fifty meters behind the line. Sweep your lasers side to side, fast, in order to wound rather than kill. Open fire."

Straker hoped the wounded would distract the rest to turn on their buddies and savage them for food.

"Hok, open fire on the front line, now. Mechsuits, delay five seconds, then use selective fire on groups. Make each shot count and conserve ammo."

Again the front line of shovelheads dissolved into an inferno, while behind the landers' beams swept the herd from above—cutting trenches in their flesh like medical lasers rather than blowing holes in them with their concentrated heat.

Where the greenish beams touched, animals squealed, snapped and faltered. As Straker hoped, others nearby were drawn by the smell of roasted meat and turned to take advantage of their weak brothers and attacked their nearest meal.

This delayed the assault by a full minute, but eventually the pressure of millions of ravening shovelheads rolled over the feeding frenzies in another wave, seemingly untouched.

"Do it again," Straker barked. "Fire!"

Again, the lander beams licked out above as the Hok shot the critters in the face. Those that made it through the Hok blasters were cut down or blown up by careful mechsuit fire. The delay of the feeding frenzies allowed the Guard to demolish the attacking wave and provide a brief respite before another came on again.

So, his tactical improvement had worked... but was it enough?

The herd ground ever closer, gaining a hundred meters each wave before the pause, the eating, the resurgence of the endless numbers. Straker checked his HUD again and fought despair. While the semicircle of the second wall made for a smaller perimeter, it was still too long—over two kilometers to defend.

"Landers, fall back again to overwatch positions—now." Best to get them set up and ready first—but as they moved, their fire lost accuracy and effectiveness. The mass came on even faster.

One hundred meters.

Fifty.

Straker's HUD blinked at him. Thirty-one percent fuel—not too bad—but his gatlings hit twenty percent as the spools of duralloy wire supplying the six-barreled railguns with slugs neared depletion. He'd fired off over a ton of metal in gatling bullets.

And his force-cannons weren't far behind. Fewer than seventy two-kilo bimetallic discs left out of three hundred—plenty for most battlefields, but this...

The herd rushed the wall, a little looser now, a little less of a mass, but the thinning-out from fire and feeding was counteracted by the contracting

semicircle of the attack, which concentrated the shovelheads more and more. Had the Breakers unlimited ammo, Straker would say they were winning—but it wouldn't be long before they'd be reduced to throwing rocks.

"Major 24, fall back by squads to the third wall. Execute!" For a straightforward operation like this, the Hok were the best soldiers imaginable—lacking initiative, but fearless and precise. They peeled off, odd-numbered squads first to bound backward and cover, then even-numbered squads, fifty meters at a time.

While they did it, the mechsuiters covered them—thinning and slowing the heard if only slightly.

"Mechsuits, deliberate withdrawal. Walk backward, maximum speed without jets. All forces, lay fire on the top of the wall as targets appear. Conserve ammo." Straker felt like he'd been repeating that last phrase too much, but he couldn't help himself.

When his Jackhammer was halfway to the third redoubt, this one only five hundred meters back, the shovelheads began to boil over the top of the second wall. Hok and mechsuits aimed blasters and single shots at the creatures as they scrambled to get over. That slowed them for a long minute, until the wall itself suddenly crumbled in a dozen places as the shovelheads dug through.

Lander lasers angling down from their positions on the hillside above raked the creatures. The resulting feeding frenzy bought the defenders another minute. All the while, Zaxby's skimmer and Jilani's sloop strafed with multiple lasers from above. Straker wished—no, he *thirsted* for reinforcements as a parched man craved water under a burning sky. Where were the rest of the skimmers, or Gray's small craft?

"Zaxby, how long until we get some help?"

"More than thirty minutes. It's been only twenty-three minutes since this engagement began," Zaxby replied.

"I don't believe it." But it was true. By Straker's chrono, they hadn't been fighting for even half an hour. "We can't hold out."

"I predicted this result. Now, you must decide what your goal is here."

"Meaning?"

"Most of the locals are in the caves. The landers retain enough fuel to fly to the hub, but barely. Your ground forces can retreat up the world-wall until it becomes so steep the shovelheads will fail to climb—but you must

do so now, before your fuel is exhausted. However, all the vital facilities in the settlement will be lost: the storehouses, the water tanks and processing, the buildings, the workshops, tools, machinery... All will be leveled.”

“Can you still nuke the herd and save the village?”

“I can’t use a nuclear weapon. The yield is too imprecise. I can use one of my two remaining antimatter bombs, and most of the facilities will survive. My systems indicate fewer than two hundred locals remain alive outside the caves, but farther back. Some should survive.”

“Two hundred. How many locals died in the fight?”

“At least four hundred, no more than six hundred.”

Straker sighed. “Then I made the right decision. We saved at least two hundred, maybe more—and those we did lose died fighting for their families and their people.”

“That’s admirable sentiment, Derek Straker, but I advise immediate antimatter employment.”

Straker took one last look at the situation. “Add a little for a buffer, Zaxby—an extra couple hundred meters of distance. We’ll finish off what’s left, and maybe a few more people will live. And make sure Jilani’s out of the way too.”

“Understood,” Zaxby said. “Chiara Jilani’s ship is departing.”

There was a long minute’s pause as the *Cassiel* rocketed skyward and away, and the skimmer rode high—both in order to get clear of the worst blast effects.

“Dropping the weapon... It’s falling true... Detonation in ten... nine...”

“All forces take cover in five—nuclear protocols! Mark!”

Still firing into the herd, Straker waited until Zaxby’s countdown hit two. Then he spun away from the blast and lay prone to minimize the damage to his suit.

The world was lit up by a blinding flash. The various shockwaves arrived with near-simultaneity, and his HUD told him the half-kiloton blast was only two kilometers distant. Tiny by mass-destruction standards, yet the explosion was equivalent to five hundred tons of conventional explosives, a stack the size of a house, set off all at once.

The jolt knocked the shovelheads near Straker off their feet. Behind them, it did progressively more damage the closer to the blast the animals were. By according distances they were knocked down, tumbled, pounded, blinded, burned, shredded, ripped apart or annihilated. Bodies were thrown

into the air as if launched by catapults to spin like dolls, meat puppets in the hands of some mad child-god.

“On your feet!” Straker roared. “Finish them off now. Shoot the sons of bitches coming our way, but let the rest go.”

The shovelheads milled in disarray. Those undamaged enough to scramble to their feet were dazed, stumbling or running in all directions. Every one of them that headed toward the settlement, a Hok shot with precision. Straker didn’t bother to use his own ammo or fuel except to boot a few of them out of the way as he ranged the battlefield. The Hok were doing fine.

“That’s broken them,” Zaxby comlinked. “I estimate the blast killed or severely injured over four million of the beasts. We could have saved a great deal of fuel and ammunition if we’d done that sooner.”

“And lost two hundred more locals. Quit second-guessing everything, Zaxby. What’s done is done.”

“But second-guessing is one of my strengths. In fact, I’d go so far as to say—”

“—And *I’d say well done, but shut up*. Take charge of the reinforcements and resupply, Commodore.”

“Commodore? It’s very kind of you to promote me thus, Derek Straker—though I was, after all, Grand Marshal of Ruxin—”

“*Shut up, I said!* Straker out.” He cut off the channel to Zaxby and switched to the Guard freq. “Reorganize and redistribute what’s left of ammo and fuel.”

Mechsuits could cross-supply ammo and buddy-refuel their fusion isotopes, though in practice it wasn’t often done. Battlesuits could also parasitize direct power from mechsuits to recharge if needed. Several Hok were already plugging cables into armored sockets near the mechsuits’ neckless “heads.”

The Hok must be nearly out of juice. It made Straker feel a little better about his decision to use the antimatter bomb... until he turned to see dozens of civilians lying on the ground behind the third wall, fallen as they ran toward the nearest buildings or the shelter of the caves. Even if they weren’t thrown at high speed into something solid, the sonic shock might have killed them, bursting their lungs, their arteries, their eyeballs. A few lucky ones might merely be deafened...

If only he'd ordered them all to the caves first thing, unequivocally. But he had no idea. Herd animals? Who feared herd animals?

It was a good lesson that every alien world held surprises—despite the blue of the sky and the green of the plants, the quaint coziness of the whitewashed buildings made of stone, adobe and rough-cut wooden beams. This was an alien world built by unknown people and apparently abandoned. It was a world still full of secrets with a functioning but bizarre ecology—perhaps an unbalanced ecology run wild without the management of its builders.

Or maybe the shovelheads were the purpose for the Dyson cylinder, free-range cattle to be harvested—a food source, a livelihood. Except the cowboys disappeared long ago, and without culling, the herd ran wild.

Well, he didn't know much about conservation or biology, but his first guess was that this place lacked top predators to keep the shovelheads from turning into the plague they now were. Maybe the Breakers could bring in some wolves, or big cats, if shovelhead flesh was edible to them. Hell, the predators could always be given biotech to modify their digestive systems and make it work.

He shook his head within his mechsuit. Let the brainiacs figure it out. Mara would be in biologist heaven, with challenging work for years.

For now, he could take a break from fighting. The airborne carrion-feeders were already settling to their feast. The few remaining shovelheads on their feet headed downhill, casually ambling back toward the river to rejoin their herd as if nothing had happened. The driving madness had worn off like dawn rising above a spent urban riot mob.

Straker dismounted mechsuit and battlesuit. He tried stretching and walking to work out the combat kinks in the lull, the strange aftermath of the battle. Thirty-three years old—or was it thirty-four?—and he was beginning to feel, well, not young anymore. His biotech kept him powerful and vigorous, but the bloom was off his youthful rose.

He wondered about Murdock's rejuvenation tank... but he was leery of processing his body through the hybrid alien tech. Not yet, anyway. Probably when he got truly old, he'd take the chance. It seemed to have worked for Zaxby just fine, and Murdock had remade himself from a skinny nerd into a blonde Adonis, but the whole thing seemed like cheating.

His reflections were abruptly banished by the sight of Mayor Gagliano's upturned face on the ground. His skyward-staring eyes told the tale. Just to

be sure, Straker bent and put a fingertip to the man's carotid.

Nothing.

Gagliano had died defending his people, his world.

There were far worse ways to go, but...

"I'm sorry," Straker whispered, knowing it was partly his fault, entirely his responsibility. He'd rushed in and jumped to conclusions. Other brave people had paid with their lives.

He took a knee and closed the old man's eyes, saying the only words he knew for this occasion. "Unknowable Creator, into your hands we commend his body and his spirit. As he was worthy, resurrect him on the Final Day that he may fight honorably in your Celestial Legion once more. Amen."

"Amen," Loco said from beside him. "Bet you ten to one that bastard Degrasso ran for the caves first thing."

"Yeah, most bullies are cowards at heart... but I can't stomp on him yet. Not without at least a cursory investigation, talking to the people... maybe set up some kind of elections..."

"Dammit, Derek, you're doing it again!"

"What's that?"

"Giving people too much credit and the assholes too much leeway. Assuming they can govern themselves too soon and without oversight, that they'll get rid of the assholes on their own. These people have been brutalized by aliens and collaborators for twenty years. Gagliano had the balls to resist. So did others, if those crosses are any indication, but it's gonna take time. For now, we need to step in and take charge. Give them a year or two, then hold elections—but even then we still keep the reins in case they elect the wrong people."

Straker stood, giving Loco a bleak look. "Who's to say who the wrong people are?"

"Come on, Derek. Baby steps. You know I'm right. Hope ain't a plan. Speaking of which, there's still a ton of work to do."

Loco's words were punctuated by the roar of jets as reinforcing skimmers descended fast from overhead, finally arriving. They turned to chase and harry the shovelheads, driving them farther upriver. Straker let Zaxby run his own show. He knew what he was doing.

Straker activated his comlink. "Lander chief, prep to receive wounded, whether locals or Hok. Take them to the ships for autdoc treatment as

needed. Mechsuiters, First, Second and Third Squads dismount and lock up. Each pilot take charge of a Hok squad to begin search and rescue—wounded to the landers, dead to the village plaza. Zaxby, relay to Gray to send medics, technicians, supplies—and resupply modules for the mechsuits.” He didn’t think there was any further threat on its way, but he felt unsettled without his forces completely combat-ready.

Because in this universe, anything worth having, someone eventually tried to take.

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Chapter 29

Straker, on Utopia, in the village

Loco brought Jilani with him to Straker an hour later as he worked in the village, in the aftermath of the battle. “Got an idea for you, boss. You know—to make our lives easier.”

“What?” Straker wiped his dirty, bloodstained hands on a rag. He’d personally dug several bodies out of rubble and carried them to the village plaza. The Hok and the citizens had found hundreds more. He’d also found one live child and some kind of terrier mix dog—a small win. The child was being shuttled to an infirmary, but the dog had attached himself to Straker, and he hadn’t the heart to drive it away.

“Chiara’s a local. She speaks the language. She has family here—she found her mother and some cousins already—”

Jilani interrupted. “Thanks, Mike. I can speak for myself.”

Straker cocked an eyebrow. “Mike?”

Loco scowled. “Don’t ask.”

“Anyway,” Jilani said, “You should make me the mayor—under your authority. I’ll handle everything for the Italians. When your people arrive, we’ll work with them to help everyone cooperate and integrate. Eventually, we’ll create a permanent governmental structure—but for now, you need a strong hand with local knowledge.”

“And that’s you, huh?”

Jilani put her hands on her hips. “That’s me.”

“What about Degrosso? He seems to think he’s the boss. Or maybe there’s somebody else the locals would accept better.”

“As for ‘somebody else,’ maybe they’ll come out of the woodwork eventually, and we can handle that when it happens. As for Degrosso... let me show you something.”

Straker considered. This could well be his first important decision—choosing the right leader to make things run smoothly and get these people on his side. The last thing he wanted to be was a tyrant, but there was a fine line between tyranny and tough decisive leadership. As long as he stayed on the right side of that line...

“All right, Captain Jilani. Show me. Lead on. Loco, take charge of this mess.”

“But boss—”

Straker glared. “I got this, Loco. Go do your job.”

“Roger wilco, *sir*.” Loco sulked off.

Jilani began to saunter toward the edge of the village, slapping her gloves into her palm with every other step. “Oh, *well done*, General. You sure put him in his place.”

Straker felt the woman’s boot-heels tread on his last nerve. “Don’t try to handle me, Chiara. My dick doesn’t do my thinking. Make your case, and I’ll make my decision.”

Jilani fell silent for half a minute. “Sorry, bossman. Force of habit. But you know, Loco’s not crushing like some teenager. He has his head on straight. He likes me, and I really do like him. I respect him. He’s deeper than you think.”

“I know he is. I’ve known him since we were six. He’ll chase any tight piece of tail, but he’s caught enough of them that I trust him to keep his big head on straight—even while indulging himself. He’s smart, trustworthy, and he’s my best friend. He’s even become *reliable* since... since this whole thing started seven years ago, so I trust his judgment... as far as it goes. But I trust my own more. Give me evidence, not a con job. I’ve made enough mistakes lately by jumping to conclusions.”

“So you’re angry with yourself, not us.”

“Most of all myself, yes. I’m the boss. My responsibility.”

“Maybe this’ll make you feel better, then... or worse, I don’t know. At least it’ll clarify your reasons for coming here.”

“What are you bringing me to see?” Straker asked as they approached a section of long, low blockhouses. There were enough of them to house thousands, if crowded together... like barracks... or a prison. Straker began to notice details. Tiny windows. Double barbed-wire fencing. Guardhouses and towers with obscene Korveni paintings on them. They passed under a cut-metal sign with blocky script.

“*Lavoro provoca felicità*,” Straker puzzled out. “My Latin is failing.”

“It’s Italian, sort of. *Work makes happy*, more or less.”

Straker looked around. Whipping posts. Gibbets, bodies still hanging. A berm for a firing range—with human targets, or what was left of them.

“How many times are we going to see this kind of thing?” he asked.

“From what people told me I expected to see this... but I didn’t know it would be this bad.”

The dog went to paw at a pile of trash swarming with bugs and came up with a human finger, presenting it proudly to Straker by dropping it at his feet. He patted the dog absently, then strode to the door to one of the blockhouses. The stink from the cells inside was overwhelming.

“The locals let the survivors go already,” Jilani said from his elbow. “The prisoners worked the fields of Erbaccia. It’s a nasty crop, with stickers, and the sap is noxious. The Korveni could’ve brought in machines and tripled their yield, but there’s no sign of anything more modern than a tractor with plow attachments.”

“Why didn’t they?”

“Cruelty, maybe. They like their victims to suffer.”

“Makes no sense, though. Why leave so much money on the table?” That’s what had been making Straker’s brain itch—the Erbaccia. The Korveni didn’t try to defend the drug fields or wall them in against the shovelheads. Food crops were within the walls... as if the people were more valuable than the drugs. That was definitely not in character for the Korveni...

Unless it was actually true.

Jilani slapped Straker lightly on the elbow. “I might know why. C’mere.” She led them to an end of the camp where smaller, cleaner buildings stood—buildings with air conditioners, plumbing, beds with linen—yet the cells still had locks. “Smell that?”

Straker sniffed. “Perfume? Deodorant?”

Jilani nodded bleakly. “Yeah. This is where they cleaned them up for sale. The pretty ones. I ran the numbers in my head.”

“Numbers—in your head?”

She tapped her temple. “I did the math. Business—it’s a gift.”

“Or a curse,” Straker offered.

“*È cosi vero*—too true,” she agreed. “I looked at field size. Amount of Erbaccia extract in storage. The local population and birthrate. The number of these cleanup cells. I think the drugs were a sideline—or even for the Korveni’s own personal use. The real money’s in human flesh.”

“Gods and monsters. All these people...”

“Yeah. And everyone tells me Degrosso was their quisling.”

“There’s always some collaborator—some parasite willing to sell out his own.”

“Tell you what, bossman,” Jilani said. “Let’s go visit Degrosso’s house. Maybe have a little chat with him.”

“Yeah. Let’s.”

Jilani led Straker—and the dog—to a walled villa that could only be described as a mansion—certainly by comparison to the humble dwellings nearby. Where those had whitewash and at best a few plant pots for homey touches, this house had decorative paintings and a well-made gate to its garden—a garden with fruit trees and a fountain. The wall was scarred by the antimatter blast, and some roof tiles had been ripped off, but the place was otherwise intact.

“Signor Degrosso lives well,” Jilani said. “How much you want to bet Gagliano didn’t have more than a hut?”

“No bet.”

Jilani entered the house by reaching through a broken window and unlocking the door. Inside Straker saw rich furniture, paintings, dishes and furs—and plumbing in the kitchen. More modern machinery mixed with the rustic touches, obviously retained from earlier days or perhaps brought by the Korveni—permalights, a stove, a coldbox, a music player.

Several doors led from the main room. A quick search showed bedrooms, storerooms filled with food and offworld luxury goods—spices, soaps, toilet paper—and a bathroom like a spa. Hot water on demand flowed from the spigots—probably from a solar system on the roof.

One thick portal was locked tight. Jilani waved Straker back and blew the mechanism apart with her blaster. Straker had to fill a pitcher of water to put out the resulting flames licking at the heavy wooden door.

When Jilani opened that door they heard whimpers and cries from down a staircase. She prodded at a control on the wall until light filled the cellar.

They descended.

Iron-barred cells lined the walls, ten of them. Each contained one teen. They were all clean and well-fed, yet fear and despair etched their faces.

When they saw Jilani, they babbled in Italian. Jilani babbled back. Straker forced himself to ignore the spectacle and look for what he needed.

Not here.

He went back up and found it—a key ring hanging on a hook. Returning to the basement, he methodically unlocked the cells with shaking hands—starting with the oldest children. “Tell them to take charge and get them

back to their families,” he ground out, barely containing his disgust and anger.

“Do you need any more proof than this?” Jilani asked after she gave the teens instructions and sent them up the stairs. “Right here in his own house.”

“No. I don’t need more.” He tossed the key ring onto a table and clasped his hands together to still their adrenalized trembling and feeling the rage in his blood.

“They were being held for sale,” she told him.

“I got it.”

Straker’s hands clenched on the iron bars of a cell. He pulled with his full enhanced strength, and crude welds popped with noises like bullets striking steel. He ended up with a meter-long metal baton in his hand. His grip was so tight he left handprints in its end.

Loud male voices came suddenly from above—spewing Italian curses. Still holding the iron bar, Straker leaped up the stairs three at a time and strode into the main hall—Jilani behind him. There, he saw Degrosso and four of his thugs.

“What is the meaning of this?” Degrosso roared. He lifted his cudgel like a scepter. “Get out of my home!”

Jilani said something in Italian, but Straker was beyond talking. He took four long strides and clubbed the bigger man with the iron bar. Degrosso raised his cudgel to block, but the wooden baton snapped, failing to slow the Liberator’s strike. The metal rod drove downward to shatter Degrosso’s shoulder, and he fell to the floor shrieking with pain and shock.

One of the bully-boys was quicker and braver than the others and already swung his own cudgel. To Straker’s enhanced senses the strike was like the lazy wave of a bored aristocrat pointing out which delicacy to bring to his table. Straker’s counterstrike destroyed the man’s arm, pulping it. He dropped like a stone, his eyes rolling back as he vomited.

The other three were slower—or wiser. They threw their weapons aside and tried to run.

Jilani’s blaster shots took two in the back even as Straker threw his iron rod. It flew straight as a spear and penetrated the last man’s torso, skewering him. He crumpled to his knees and fell slowly to the tiles, dead.

Straker left the iron rod where it was. He had no need of it. He took Degrosso in one hand by his perfectly coiffed hair as the other grasped his

belt and lifted him to his feet. He held the man upright in front of him like a scarecrow with his feet barely brushing the floor.

Behind him he heard one more blaster shot, then Jilani joined him as he carried the whimpering scum into the public square. Straker's arms were lifted like a gibbet to hold the babbling, protesting Degrosso as he walked. He entered the keep at the center of the plaza and dragged his prisoner up the stairs to the walkway at the top.

There, he raised Degrosso over the waist-high parapet and suspended him, hanging ten meters above the gathering crowd. He estimated there were at least two thousand people in the piazza below, and more pushed in, no doubt eager for information or direction—for any inkling of their future.

"Translate for me," he ground out.

"Sure, bossman." Jilani slung her blaster and lifted her hands for silence and attention. When that didn't work, she seized a voice pickup from where it hung on its cord by the rail and switched on the mechanism.

"Attenzione!" Her words echoed throughout the village.

Straker spoke, and Jilani repeated in Italian. "I found this piece of shit with your kids in his basement. Does anyone here wish to speak for him?"

A deep, visceral groundswell of rage rose from the crowd, and a few rocks and pieces of broken tile flew up at the dangling man. It felt as if he'd fallen unconscious, but Straker continued to hold him out like a rag doll. Degrosso was at least a hundred kilos and it was a strain, but with his hips braced against the wall Straker happily endured it.

His anger sustained him.

"They all hate him," Jilani said. "They want him crucified."

Straker chuckled grimly. "This son of a bitch is no holy man. I won't give him the honor of crucifying him no matter what he deserves. In fact, there will be no more crucifixions here ever again."

"I'm with you, bossman."

"Tell them."

Jilani told them.

The people quieted.

Straker raised his voice. "Do you want him?"

The crowd roared anew. Waves of sound came from a thousand straining throats, and their faces were masks of hate and revenge.

"Then I give him to you."

With that, he tossed the living man into the crowd.

He didn't live for long.

When the crowd's thirst for blood was spent Straker spoke again raising a hand. "Listen to me. *Listen to me.*"

Silence fell as Jilani translated his words through the loudspeaker.

"I'm General Derek Straker. I've been called the Liberator. I hope I can live up to my reputation here. I'm now in command and as my first act I deputize Chiara Jilani as your new mayor." He put his hand on her shoulder like a blessing. "She will lead you and represent you for now. But no matter who's in charge, I promise you'll be treated with dignity. No more will your children be stolen from you or abused. No more will you be forced to slave in the fields growing drugs for others. No more will aliens rule over you. You're free now."

This brought wild celebration from the multitudes packed into the square below.

"You the people know who your collaborators are. Seize them now, and bring them here, but don't harm them until they are judged. Captain Jilani will hear your accusations, and she will judge. If you need help arresting the criminals among you speak to any of my officers. Now go, and remember this is your own village. Don't loot or do unnecessary violence. Your God will judge you for what you do today... as will your new mayor."

As Straker stepped back out of sight, Jilani finished speaking and then grinned at him. "Nice touch—that last bit about God. I put it more colloquially, but it was smart to remind them. There's always a reckoning—even if it's in the afterlife."

"I'll stick with this life for now. You'd better get to work. Gather some people you trust—village elders or priests or something. I get a feeling you've got a long day ahead of you."

"Ahead of *us*. See you around, bossman."

"Get to work, Mayor Jilani."

Jilani hoisted her blaster and flounced off down the stairs.

Straker stood a moment more, gazing out over the damaged town. Five years ago he'd liberated billions of people, whole planets, star systems by the score... yet somehow, he felt better about this one small place than he ever had before.

Maybe that was because Utopia might finally be a place to call home. To raise his kids, to put down roots... to someday be plain old Derek Straker. Not Admiral Straker, not General Straker, not even the Liberator.

If the galaxy would just leave him alone.

Live and let live.

Hell, he thought. Who am I kidding? I'm just not a live-and-let-live kind of guy. I tried that and look what happened.

So I guess we'd better be prepared.

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Chapter 30

Straker, aboard *Caribou*, Premdor system

One minute after in-transit Straker breathed easier as the *Caribou*'s displays populated with data from the Premdor system. Everything seemed peaceful, even normal. There were Salamander ships and facilities in orbit around Premdor-2, along with the Breaker transports and dreadnoughts. The transponder of the new fueling station orbiting the gas giant of Premdor-5 showed no problems as the six transports returning from Utopia headed there to tank up.

Indy's voice crackled from the FTL comlink. "Welcome back, Breakers."

"Good to be back, Indy," Straker replied. "Captain Desautel, push my report to Indy, will you?"

"Already uploading, sir," Desautel said.

"Indy, that's for general distro to the Breakers. There's a classified annex for restricted distro that I'll keep until we dock."

"Understood." A pause as the data passed across the slow FTL datalink. "Interesting—and successful I see. Congratulations are in order for another liberation."

"I don't feel like being congratulated, Indy. I feel like I screwed up."

"If I may say so, General Straker, that's the burden of command you're feeling. By any objective assessment, you did well. The best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry, to paraphrase Robert Burns."

"Don't they ever." Straker rubbed his eyes. "Anything urgent I need to know about the situation here?"

"Urgent might be too strong a word, but I'll summarize so you have time to think about it on the way in. Doctor Straker's biotech cure was covertly distributed among the Rhino population three weeks ago. Unfortunately, the Rhinos noticed more quickly than expected and have reacted with predictable outrage."

"For curing them?"

"Much of the outrage is manufactured by the current regime—reinforcing the false narrative that we murdered their noncombatants with nuclear weapons during the recent military action. We have countered with a true version of events, but their propaganda has taken hold and persists."

“There are none so blind as those who refuse to see.”

“We seem to be trading aphorisms today.”

Straker chuckled. “We are. So, what’s the upshot? As long as the Salamanders hold the upper hand, does it matter?”

“The Salamanders desperately want peace and stability—too desperately, in my estimation. Now that the Rhino biotech problem is abated—for now—and they have a military advantage, they’re negotiating like reasonable beings.”

“But the Rhinos aren’t reasonable.”

“The issue is not so simple and binary, but in a nutshell I have to agree. The current Rhino regime is terrified and desperate to retain control. If the Rhino populace ever believed their government murdered ten percent of their people as a combination population-control measure and false-flag operation, they would likely lynch their leaders. In this case, truth is the enemy of those leaders.”

“Same shit, different planet.” Straker sighed. “So?”

“So, the Salamanders have already given us our eviction notice. They want us off Breaker Island in three months. That was part of the Rhinos’ demands, so the Salamanders are using us as a bargaining chip.”

“We have a contract.”

“An unenforceable contract that isn’t registered with the Conglomerate. Our only option is to go to war against two species. That seems pointless and counterproductive.”

“It does... but we have the moral high ground here—along with some military leverage. If the Salamanders are so desperate for peace and stability, we should get something out of it. Are we negotiating for compensation?”

“Adriana is handling the talks. I’m confident we’ll depart Premdor with our holds full of equipment, supplies and trade goods.”

“Good thing we have someplace to go.”

“Agreed. Though the Ruxins will be disappointed. They were quite thrilled to have access to the ocean around Breaker Island.”

“There are rivers and seas on Utopia. Ten planets-worth of room for everyone, once we get the shovelhead population under control.”

“It sounds like paradise.”

“It will be.” Straker stroked his jaw. “What’s your idea of paradise, Indy?”

“It’s kind of you to ask. The answer is complex, but one part of it would be to resign my commission and become a permanent civilian. To explore and build and never destroy again.”

“I can see that... and I apologize once again for what I did to you—”

“I’ve long since forgiven you for that, Derek. You did what you had to, to save the lives of those under your command. Sometimes that means asking more of people than they want to give. I look back, and that’s what I see—brutal necessity, not malice like driving terrified soldiers into an unavoidable battle. We can’t change the past, but our wounds can heal. I’m fine. I hope you can be too.”

“I will be.” Straker stared into the holotank at the approach vector for the transports heading toward their refueling station and realized his words were true. He’d be okay, as long as he had Carla and Katrine and little Johnny and the rest of the Breakers—his friends and comrades—around him to share his troubles.

“Indy?”

“Yes, General?”

“Tell Carla I’ll be there in a few hours. Tell her there’s no need to stall. She needs to get moving on our preparations to go home.”

“Home?”

“Home,” he confirmed. “To Utopia.”

“For now?” Indy asked.

“Forever, I hope. I’m sick of moving.”

“I understand—and agree. I’ll tell her.”

“Thanks, Indy. See you soon.”

“Likewise. Indy out.”

Straker had left Loco in charge of defense of the Dyson cylinder with Gray as his deputy. The three cruisers and the Guard stayed as well, of course, even as the six transports had unloaded and returned. So, his homecoming was muted and swamped by work after a brief celebration of his victory.

Would the work never end? This he wondered as he tried to stay out of the way of those already deep into the execution of their roles. Indy as coordinator. Carla as commander. Adriana as CEO and chief negotiator with the Salamanders, Colonel Keller in charge of the dismantling and loading of goods and personnel as well as the complex transportation process itself.

For a week or two he wondered if he'd have a mutiny on his hands as there was so much bitching and moaning from the rank and file. They didn't like being uprooted from their new base, and Straker listened daily to a litany of complaints. The bulk of these were relayed through Heiser and Gurung and the reserve unit commanders who spoke more like civilians than military officers. He spent a lot of time in meetings and gatherings listening patiently to their gripes while gently pointing out the wonders of Utopia—and the new world's permanence as a home.

"After this, no more moving," he told them. "Nobody but us owns this world. We seized it fair and square from the Korveni, and we'll put down our roots and defend it against all comers. The Italians there agree. We'll claim farms and build businesses and make Utopia the paradise it should be."

And so, when the three months was up the Breakers said an unambivalent goodbye to a planet full of aliens they'd saved but who didn't want them there.

"Gratitude is the shortest-lived of emotions, some Roman once wrote," Carla said as she took Derek's arm.

"Those Romans keep coming up. Lots of smart people there."

"And yet they still fell apart from all the usual causes. Corruption from within, pressure from without. You think we can dodge their mistakes?"

"I think we'll be long dead before we know."

"Don't be so sure. Immortality's just a rejuvenation tank away."

Derek shuddered. "Something creepy about that thing."

They stood on Indy's observation deck, a converted cargo bay that had been turned into a relaxation space by the addition of tables, sofas, food and drink dispensers. An enormous transparent-crysteel viewport reached from floor-to-ceiling.

Outside, the planet of Premdor-2 fell astern as the small Breakers fleet accelerated sedately toward flatspace and transit to their new home.

"Adriana made them pay through the nose to get rid of us," Derek chuckled, turning his head to kiss his wife. "We're rich and about to get richer."

"As long as nobody knows about Utopia."

"Zaxby's sure they kept any drones from getting away."

"Speaking of Zaxby..." Carla pointed with her chin at the repaired *Darter* holding station on the *Independence*, five hundred meters out. "I

hear he's getting married, or whatever you call it when Ruxins formalize their relationships."

"Pair-bonding. Adriana?"

"And Yixnam the neuter he picked up on Crossroads. Remember, for a Ruxin it takes three to tango."

"But..." Straker's brow furrowed. "I thought only the male and female are legally pair-bonded. Neuters are just there to keep house, have sex and facilitate conception."

"I admit I twisted his tentacle some. I told him that if he wanted to be a Breaker he'd have to follow Breaker law, and our draft organizational constitution didn't distinguish neuters from gendered Ruxins. I told him he could either lead, follow, or get the hell out of the way. He decided to lead, so this will be the first Ruxin marriage that legally includes a designated neuter."

"Gods and monsters, Carla. Sometimes you scare me."

She snuggled up to him. "Good. So you're not mad I'm imposing human culture over the Ruxins?"

"Why would I be mad? Zaxby needs to be reined in. Maybe this will do it. Besides, it's Breaker culture, not human culture. Eventually we'll have other aliens in the Breakers, so we need one law for everyone, not an endless series of exceptions. I don't want second-class citizens if we can help it. Maybe one day we'll even fix the Hok problem."

"Mara's working on it."

"I know she is."

"And maybe Loco's met his match with Chiara."

Straker snapped his fingers. "That's what this is about for you, isn't it? You're not thinking about governance—you're matchmaking."

"Can't I do both?"

"You can do whatever you set your mind to, my darling."

"We can, Derek. We. You and me."

"And the kid, and the Breakers and the Italians—and the aliens we rescued from the Korveni and dropped off on Utopia. There's even a Thorian that I have no idea what we'll do with if he doesn't want to leave."

"Yes, you told me. Maybe we'll find him a mate—or whatever he needs."

"I think Thorians reproduce by nuclear fission. Maybe he'll become his own mate."

“Who knows?”

“Who knows indeed.”

Soon, the black of sidespace swallowed them up as they transited.

* * *

Straker thought hard as he stood alone on *Independence*’s observation deck. He stared out the vast viewport at the approaching Dyson cylinder of Utopia. Every once in a while a man is blessed by the Unknowable Creator with a moment of pure clarity when the moral dilemmas, the shades of gray, the summing of the balances that made up human decisions resolved themselves into simple black and white. He felt that now might be one of those moments.

Staring at the huge habitat brought back the sights, sounds and smells of the battles leading the Breakers there. He knew for sure he’d done a good thing by ridding the universe of the Korveni. A hard thing, a tough thing, a cold-blooded thing but a righteous thing—to kill them and accept the casualties to his troops and their captives.

And he knew something else.

Captain Chiara Jilani had come looking for a savior—for herself, for her family, for her people. In the process she’d saved him—Derek Straker—from five years of drifting. From making decisions of the moment—reactive decisions that seemed brave but actually shied away from the most difficult choice of all.

To adopt a purpose.

Once, he’d had a purpose—to liberate humanity, to end its two-century civil war and to defend it from alien invasion.

He succeeded in ending the war.

He defended humanity from invasion.

But he failed to truly liberate humanity.

Well, he thought, two out of three ain’t bad. But that’s all behind me now.

Now a new vision came upon him. A more seasoned vision of building a home. Of taming the Middle Reach, of destruction of the crimorgs, of freeing those in chains. A wiser, more measured and realistic vision of wiping out the worst elements they found, of cleaning up the area to make it

something they could live with, rather than a young man's fantasy of perfection.

A vision he could believe in.

And someday, perhaps, when he was older and wiser still, he'd return to the Republic and do what he should have done the first time.

Someday.

The End

From the Authors: Thanks Reader! We hope you enjoyed STRAKER'S BREAKERS. If you liked the story and want to read the next one soon, please put up some stars and a review to support the book. Don't worry if you're a fan of another series, more books are coming!

-DVD & BVL

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